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BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

AN AMERICAN GIRL ABROAD.

16mo. Cloth. Illustrated. \$1.50.

KATHERINE EARLE.

12mo. Cloth. Illustrated. \$1.50.

LEE & SHEPARD, PUBLISHERS, BOSTON.

HIS INHERITANCE.

BY

ADELINE TRAFTON,

AUTHOR OF "AN AMERICAN GIRL ABROAD," "KATHERINE EARLE," &c.



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LEE AND SHEPARD, PUBLISHERS.

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HIS INHERITANCE.

CHAPTER I.

BLOSSOM.

IT is November of 185—, and Blossom is going back across the plains to her home. Seventeen years before, a baby had been born, within a rude fort upon the Arkansas River, to the post-sutler Stubbs and his wife; and this baby was Blossom.

It is but just to say, that, earlier in life, this man Stubbs, had borne another name, which had been lost, beyond finding again, somewhere in the Western wilderness; or, to be exact, his odd, stunted figure had won for him this sobriquet, before which his rightful cognomen burned dimly for a while, and finally went out altogether. He had resigned his name without much of an effort to retain it, thereby showing little of pride or spirit. But rights of any kind were held here only at the muzzle of a revolver, and had been gradually narrowed down, until they involved little more than life and liberty: to contend for any thing less was hardly worth the powder. And then one name was as good as another, or even better if it carried an idea, which Stubbs certainly

did. The early trappers and traders of the Far West were not given to much speaking. Each brief word was suggestive; and the names, bestowed in praise or derision, were mostly biographies in miniature. Sometimes they were but personally descriptive, — as in this case, — or they were made to serve as a perpetual exclamation-point after a man.

But, however expressive such titles may be when applied to one individual, they become incongruous, not to say absurd, when made to include a family. What could be more appropriate, more sharply descriptive of the broad-shouldered, serene-faced, stumpy little man who bore it, than the name of Stubbs? But it was a grim sarcasm upon the woman who had shared his quarters for a dozen years before the baby's eyes opened upon them.

She was tall; she was gaunt as a gray wolf in winter. She was strong of arm and stout of nerve, with a talent for devising, and a will for executing, almost any work. She could serve a dinner to a tolerably straitened garrison that would tempt a king; or she could steady a rifle, and drop a red-skin if need be at three hundred yards. There was even a rough kind of femininity about the woman, who was by no means disagreeable to look at, with her bright black eyes, and her brown cheeks showing a subdued flame. She had been known more than once to nurse a wounded man back to life when the surgeons had given him up, with just scolding enough, it must be owned, to spur him on to convalescence. Add to these the aggressive qualities of thrift and neatness, and we shall have a perfect character, you will say. Oh, no! Do you fancy that all the natural graces as well as the Christian virtues are to be found in one

individual? She was envious. But that is not so rare a fault that it need be dwelt upon. She was crafty and unscrupulous. But the first she concealed by the second; and the third, in tending upon the other two, kept in the background. And then she was comely to look at (and that is a better cloak than charity even), with her sleek black hair, and the fresh color just deadened by the tan on her cheeks, — comely to look at, if one could forget the embers in her eyes, which a gust of passion might blow into a blaze. After all, it was a kind of beauty which a man might like to look upon, but would hardly covet for his own.

As for her thrift and neatness, the sutler's quarters showed the effect of these good qualities, which were a kind of stockade about the real woman. Her home was tidy and inviting, or would have been, but that the tidiness became tyrannical at times. Gradually a kind of *cabaret* of a most respectable pattern was established here, where the officers dropped in of an evening to order a bit of supper, which the mistress of the house was not above cooking with her own hands. A well-thumbed pack of cards was brought into requisition while waiting for this to be served; and rumor did say that many a pile of government gold changed hands over the table here. But rumor is always malicious, and this may or may not have been true. Drinking there certainly was, but no brawling over the cards or wine, or the friendly pipe with Stubbs himself, who was a quiet, shrewd man, an excellent listener at all times; and what could be more desirable in a companion? He could even tell a story of his own when Mrs. Stubbs was not by; for the post-sutler stood somewhat in awe of his energetic helpmeet. There was not

her equal this side the Rocky Mountains, he often declared; and as this assertion included not only the plains, but that mystical region "the States," it was a rare compliment indeed. Still it must be owned that she was a kind of moral ear of Juggernaut to the man; and not to Stubbs alone, but to all the frequenters of the house, not one of whom would have dared offer any thing but the most exaggerated respect to its mistress. In her own domain she ruled a queen. She served, it is true, but by favor; and woe to any man who forgot what was due from a guest to his hostess! for a warm corner in the little family-room was not to be despised of a winter night, when the snow covered them in, and the wind howled a dismal chorus outside, while the rusty stove at the officers' quarters gave out smoke without heat.

Here the fire was always bright, with an apple or two puffing and spitting steam before it, or the red-hot poker innocently but significantly blinking among the coals. The rough plastered walls were covered with prints which Stubbs had found in trading-expeditions to the States, or Mrs. Stubbs had scissored thriftily from illustrated journals, and were volumes in themselves of history, biography, and travel. But, since the titles had been mostly sacrificed to space, there was a tantalizing indefiniteness about the whole, which possibly enhanced its interest. A Mexican blanket covered the centre of the floor upon extraordinary occasions, with rude skins spread here and there for softer comfort. Scant curtains of red moreen hid the tiny windows, and gave color to the place; while the furniture was made up of odd pieces brought by the sutler at various times from Independence,—that outpost of civilization

at this time. It had been chosen with an eye for but one quality, — durability; and even this had required an eye of faith. But its “exceeding lastingness,” like that in Kalander’s house, had almost made it appear by this time exceeding beautiful. Comfortable it was, at least.

And this was the home into which, after a dozen childless years spent in as many rough, rude places, the baby came to the post-sutler Stubbs and his wife.

It was an event to stir the foundations of their world; but it brought little change. Sergeant Duckling improvised a cradle from the half of an old flour-barrel, which Mrs. Stubbs covered with gay-flowered chintz ferreted from Stubbs’s stock of unsalable wares, and set up in a corner seemingly devised expressly for it. To be sure, the pipes were banished now to the adjoining store; but the baby more than made up for any such deficiency. It was passed from hand to hand, and tossed and dandled in air in a way that would have agonized a less courageous mother. But Mrs. Stubbs bore it all with the equanimity of pride and ignorance. And the child laughed and crowed its delight at the involuntary gymnastics it was made to perform in the arms of its rough friends. A pale, delicate little flower was this which had blossomed upon Mrs. Stubbs’s bosom. The ways of Providence are indeed past finding out. A wolf’s cub, a young coyote, would have been more akin to the woman. But no: wolf-cubs are born into sheep-folds, and lambs lie down by lions, and no one knows the reason why. Still, something of softening did come to her with motherhood, as well as a deeper craft and a more grasping ambition. The one growing purpose of her life had been to push Stubbs on in the world,

where, or toward what end, she hardly knew. They had schemed and worked and hoarded, — the man, at least, honestly enough, — until they had become rich, — rich even for “the settlements,” where Mrs. Stubbs’s eyes and desires were wont to turn. But now, what would she not do for the child! There was no limit to her desires, or to the vague visions over that rude cradle.

But no ambitious dreams disturbed the father. There is a vein of poetry in the nature of every man; and the coming of the baby was like sinking a shaft into Stubbs’s soul, though very little of the precious ore ever came to the surface — a few trifling specimens only — to show the richness of the lode. He was by no means a godly man; but, cradling the child in his arms, he would croon over her hour after hour, not the rollicking songs of a camp, but quaint, awful hymns, enough to strike terror to the heart of an ordinary individual, and picked up no one knew where.

“Great spoils I shall win
From death, hell, and sin,”

sang the father in a hoarse, broken voice, and with many a twist and turn to the weird air.

The child looked up into his face, and smiled her contentment. What were death, hell, and sin to her happy babyhood! It was he who first called her Blossom; and a frail little blossom she was, with her white face, her solemn brown eyes, and her hair like the fluff on the dandelions in summer-time. And Blossom she came to be to all the garrison, — from the stern colonel in command, down to little Bob White, who made the last in the line on dress-parade. Not that this was her bap-

tismal name ; for christened she was one sabbath afternoon in summer, in the presence of the whole garrison, through the zeal of the new chaplain it must be owned, rather than from any desire of her parents. The poor man had but scant opportunity for wearing his bands, or performing the rites of his church here, and could not allow such an one as this to go by unimproved. The child looked gravely, but without fear, upon the assembled company, until she caught sight of Sergeant Duckling's good-natured face, when she broke into an irreverent, gurgling laugh, ending in a most uncompromising crow, greatly to the embarrassment of the chaplain, who was young and unmarried. The colonel tried to frown down the smile awakened by this undignified conduct of the candidate ; but there was a twinkle in his own eye. Dear me ! Had he not dandled the child in his own arms by the hour, when his wife had borrowed her for the afternoon ?

“Name this child,” said the chaplain hastily.

He was alarmed for his own dignity and the solemnity of the service he had inaugurated.

Mrs. Stubbs stood like a drum-major by her husband's side, gorgeous in a new pink bonnet fashioned directly after that of the colonel's wife. She gave him a nudge with her elbow to remind him to speak up promptly, which only served to rout every idea from poor Stubbs's mind. It was only when this domestic spur had been applied the second time that he succeeded in stammering out a name which nobody could understand. The chaplain, however, took it up, and repeated it in a sonorous voice. To tell the truth, he had it upon a bit of paper in his hand all the time. The asking was but a form.

It was his mother's name over which Stubbs had stammered. It had not been uttered for many a long year; nor was it embarrassment alone that brought the quaver to his voice as he pronounced it. The water dropped upon the child's wondering face, the last prayer was uttered, the last amen pronounced, the band struck up, the company dispersed, and little Blossom was made a Christian.

Not that she had been so great a sinner before. She was a gentle child from her birth; and the "old Adam," whom the chaplain had prayed that her heart might be rid of, seemed hardly to have taken a lodgement there. Her pretty ways had made her the pet of the garrison. Never a week passed, that Orderly Sims did not appear with the compliments of the colonel's lady, and begging the loan of Miss Blossom for the day. From these visits she returned, decked out like a queen barbaric, and laden with spoils. Even the Indians hanging about the post awakened to something like interest at sight of the white pappoose. Their tawny faces had no terror for the child; and, when she arrived at the dignity of standing upon her feet, the gentle young tyrant refused any covering for those dimpled members, but the softest of deer-skin moccasins, braided and fringed and beaded after the pattern of the ones worn by her dusky friends. But, if these were her friends, Bob White was her slave. He it was who carved a misshapen piece of anatomy, which he called a doll, for Blossom's delight, and which became her greatest treasure.

And so the years slipped by, but not without seasons of bitter pain. More than once were her friends ordered away, not to return, and Blossom's tender heart was broken in the parting. Even Bob White's turn came

at last ; and he marched out of the gate with his company, his boyish heart heavier than the knapsack on his shoulders. He had sat up half the night to cut out a rude figure of a horse as a parting-present for Blossom. It was a pitiful creature, if the truth be told. Endowed with life, it would have found locomotion impossible, from the difference in the length of its legs, if nothing more, and would have been shot, in mercy, no doubt. But Blossom wept fond, bitter tears over it (Bob had baptized it already with his own), and hid it under her pillow at night, refusing to be comforted for the loss of her friend.

“ Why did he go away ? ” she asked of her mother.

“ Because he had to,” was the not very satisfactory response.

“ *Why* did he had to ? ”

“ He must go with the rest. Somebody else’ll come,” Mrs. Stubbs added, with a clumsy attempt at comforting, — “ somebody you’ll like a deal better.”

The child regarded her with grave eyes. All language beyond the simplest was a foreign tongue to her as yet. She did not take in its meaning readily. Then, all at once, she broke into an astonished burst of tears.

“ But *I* want Bob White ! ” she said.

She had not yet learned the hard lesson, to take what one can get, and be thankful and quiet : so she sobbed herself to sleep, poor little Blossom !

As she grew older, the ladies at the post taught her to read and to sew, in neither of which not uncommon accomplishments Madam Stubbs excelled. Blossom conquered her letters without much difficulty, and pricked her way along the path of needlework hardly less slowly. There was a natural refinement about the

child, which these gentle associations had nourished ; and it was not book-learning or fine sewing alone the little maiden was gaining day after day, the mother saw, with uneasy pride and a twinge of jealousy. Were they not drawing the child away from her ? And yet she looked with admiration upon the growing accomplishments of the girl, and the gentle ways which came to her as by right of birth ; while between Blossom and her father there was neither misgiving nor fear, but a sympathy which needed not the expression of words, though they talked together often by the hour, cheek to cheek, under the stars or in the dim firelight.

“ Father, what are the stars ? ” she asked one night, when, held in his arms, she had pulled aside the little red curtain before the window.

“ Them’s worlds, Blossom, — as big or bigger’n this, I reckon.”

“ Oh, no, father ! ” the child replied, with a grave shake of the head. “ They’re too little. And you shouldn’t tell such stories to Blossom,” she added reprovingly, quoting a caution she had overheard from the lips of the colonel’s lady the day before, “ because she might believe ’em.”

“ Then they’re eyes,” said Stubbs, who would have named them any thing to please the child. He took the reproof as gravely as it was given. “ That’s what they are, Blossom : they’re good folks’s eyes, — up in heaven.”

“ Yes,” said the child, entirely satisfied, “ they’re eyes ; and they always look at Blossom.”

He taught her something of arithmetic, and even ferreted a geography from his stores, over which he was hardly less mystified than she. To crown all, he was

discovered one day poring over an old grammar, his sleeves rolled up, and his shirt-collar unbuttoned.

"It's for the little un," he said, shutting the book up in confusion. "I thought as how she might come to it by an' by."

It was told as a great joke that Stubbs had begun the study of grammar; and many were the thrusts at him in consequence, which he turned off good-naturedly. But a great trouble was beginning to gather in his heart. He had learned something, if not grammar, from the volume he could not master; and this was, that Blossom must go away. The wife of the commanding officer had spoken to him about it before now. Her own daughters were in the States at school, and Blossom must go: he could not teach her. He acknowledged it to himself at last; and the gentle, pretty little creature, with her refined ways and her warm heart, must not be left to grow up in ignorance. The colonel's wife put it to him in this way; but he knew it before she spoke: it had been growing upon him day by day, like a heavy burden. It was very kind in the wife of the commanding officer to take such an interest in a child who was, after all, only the post-sutler's daughter. She did not, indeed, suggest the fashionable establishment where her own daughters were fitting themselves for an elegant and rather mild struggle with life; but she did what was better for the child,—she recommended an old schoolmate of her own, now in straitened circumstances, who would perhaps, for a consideration, take charge of Blossom, and superintend her education for a term of years. She even wrote and arranged the whole matter, with Stubbs's sanction. And so it came about that Blossom left home; though how it came about, and

through what agony of parting, we need say nothing here. Hearts bleed and heal again, or learn to cover their wounds, and the world goes on. And people who are neither cultured, nor hardly civilized, as we reckon such things, forget themselves in the good of others, and give up their own out of their arms, if, by so doing, a blessing may but come to them.

Already a dream of making a lady of her daughter had taken possession of Mrs. Stubbs. It reconciled her, in a measure, to parting with Blossom. But no such vision consoled the father. In some way, which he scarcely understood, it was to be a gain to the child: that was all. So he made the long journey over the trail to Independence with her, and from there to the town where she was to be left. Something in the face of the woman to whom she was to be intrusted pleased the father, when they had found her at last; and he left the child with a sense of security which did much to comfort him, though with ill-concealed grief over the parting. "Bring her up to be a straight kind of a gal," he said. Then he kissed Blossom good-by, and turned his face back toward the wilderness indeed!

Once a year, from this time, he visited her, affecting to examine into the progress she had made in her studies, with an inward wonderment, but an outward composure, which quite deceived the girl, who believed that he knew it all. Even when she learned otherwise, she kept that knowledge to herself, for love of him. But after these visits, which his wife seldom shared, a strange restlessness took possession of the man for a time. "I reckon by another year we shall sell out, and shift to the States, — by spring, most likely," he would say, until it came to be a proverb at the post (where Blossom had grown

to be a myth, as her old friends were ordered away, and replaced by men who had never known her); so that, when any thing was particularly uncertain, its time was fixed at the day "when Stubbs sells out, and shifts to the States."

And now to return to the beginning of the chapter: Blossom, aged seventeen, her education at last completed, was going back to her home.

CHAPTER II.

TOWARD THE SETTING SUN.

A LONG train of covered wagons is slowly dragging itself westward across the plains, along the valley of the Arkansas River, winding in and out among the hillocks which mark the surface, and hugging the ground as it crawls on like some huge white serpent upon the scorched grass.

It lacks hardly an hour of sunset, and they have been upon the move since daylight, with but a short halt at noon; yet the drivers urge on the weary creatures that pull the laden wagons. They have left the river at a point where the trail divides to form a bow. The arc follows the windings of the stream; while the string, which they pursue, leads through a more barren region, — a valley where, at this season (the middle of November), nothing meets the eye but the lowering sky overhead, and the rolling land beneath it covered with blackened, scrubby buffalo-grass. Through all the long day they have been shut into this valley of desolation, spurring on the exhausted animals, and choosing this route, though it leads away from wood and water, in order, if possible, to shorten the distance to Fort Atchison. Rumors reached them, before setting out from

Independence, that the Santa Fé trail was infested by hostile Indians ; but, so far, they have been unmolested. Last night, however, the smoke of numerous camp-fires off in the south-west excited their alarm ; a false one, perhaps, since they may have risen from some camp peaceably disposed, moving south to winter-quarters. If they had been well guarded, or unhampered by these heavy wagons, the dozen irresponsible men of the party might have pushed on at a faster pace to the fort ; but with a force of scarce thirty men, picked up by chance at the last moment, discretion was better than foolhardy haste. Another day will bring them to the river again, if no ill chance befall them ; and the setting of another sun to Fort Atehison, the destination of the larger part of the train. As for the remainder of the wagons, which are to go on to Santa Fé even, an additional force can be procured at the fort to guard their passage, if necessary.

The wagons creak on heavily as the sun slowly moves toward its setting, and the cold of a November night begins to settle down upon the weary company. Every thing like song or story has long since died among them. A muttered oath at the oxen or mules, a muttered complaint disguised in a curse, are the only expressions left ; and these grow stronger by condensation as the weary miles stretch out under their heavy feet. Suddenly, as they gaze with dull eyes upon the distance, which tempts with no change from the monotonous landscape about them, a faint puff of dust rises, grows, spreads, rolls into a cloud against the reddening horizon, — a revolving yellow cloud, — from which are presently projected two mounted figures tearing down the trail to meet them. The wagons are hastily drawn into

a double line, with the cavalry on either side; but scarcely is this accomplished, when, the cloud having cleared behind the advancing riders, they discover that their foes — if foes they are — number but these two men; and in a moment more they recognize the black, flying locks, and even the gaudily-fringed buckskins, of Tony Baird, the half-breed scout, who, with a companion of his own profession, has been out since daylight.

The strain of anxious expectation, and the preparations for defence, give place to the most heedless curiosity; for only in moments of actual danger is there any thing like discipline in the loose-bound company. Every man rushes to the front to hear the news, the teamsters abandoning their wagons, and even pressing before stout, purple-faced Captain Luttrell, who commands the escort. One of these, whose face shows the delicate coloring, and suggests the texture, of an ox-hide, is the first to address the new-comers. But Dan Cogger is the wagon-master of the train, and has therefore some right to a front place and the first word.

His shoulders, with which he pushes himself through the little crowd gathered about the horsemen, are those of a bison, hidden under a coarse flannel shirt. His long nether limbs are covered by a pair of old buckskins, tanned, one might say, with dust and ashes, and half concealed by long cavalry boots. Drawn down over his stiff red hair, and almost hiding his sharp gray eyes, is a cavalry hat, from which all grace of outline departed long since, with full half its rim.

“We’re uncommon glad to see ye,” says the wagon-master with a grim smile, as the scouts bring up their ponies with a jerk, throwing each upon its haunches; “but ’pears to me it’s hardly wuth while t’ kill the

beasts, an' come tearin' down on us 's though a thousand devils were arter ye."

The wagon-master is somewhat ashamed of the war-like preparation made to receive the two scouts.

"A thousand devils!" gasps one, out of breath with the race. "Ye may say that; an', if ye put it at two, ye won't be far out o' the way. We followed their trail for a mile or two, till it struck off toward the river, where they're camped most likely by this time, not half a dozen miles from here."

"And the tracks were fresh?" Captain Luttrell takes up the question.

"Not three hours old."

"Some camp, perhaps, moving south," the captain says carelessly, taking his cigar from his lips.

"I'll be —— if it was!" replies the scout, whose professional acuteness seems called into question by this remark. "We followed 'em up sharp for a mile or two, and there wasn't the scratch of a lodge-pole among 'em."

"How many, did you say?" Captain Luttrell throws away his cigar: it has lost its flavor.

"Five hundred, — a thousand, — ten thousand, — as many as you'll want to see, I reckon: we forgot to count 'em."

And, without waiting to be questioned further, the scout drew the bridle across the neck of his mustang, and rode off among the men.

They were a feeble force of fighting men, — a small company of cavalry, a couple of officers on the way to join their commands, and half a dozen young blades from the States in search of adventure. This was all. The teamsters would count for nothing in case of an attack.

Cogger's sharp features had been working in a remarkable manner during this brief dialogue, as though he were trying with difficulty to swallow this unwelcome news.

"We must make the best of onpleasant sarcumstances," he says at last, giving one final contortion to his face. "Ef the durned fools ain't left the teams!" he burst out in angry amazement, forgetting that he had been pushed and jostled by these same men for the past five minutes. But he had been in spirit in the midst of that Comanche camp up the river, counting his enemies, and balancing the rather uneven chances of the next day. He turned upon the recreant drivers now, with a skilful discharge of ingenious oaths, which sent every man to his place, and, by restoring the atmosphere ordinarily hanging about the train, revived its fainting courage in a measure.

They must push on. Every mile gained was a fresh hold on life. With this foe between them and the fort, there was every thing to fear. Still, by chance or good fortune, they might yet escape their foes, who were, perhaps, unaware of their approach. If they could but slip by the Indian camp before striking the river again! The darkness, the bend in the trail, would favor the attempt; or, at the worst, they were not far from help. Dan Cogger, riding at the head of the train, his torn hat pulled down over his restless gray eyes, was already planning in his mind how, when night should have come, to dodge the Indian camp, gallop to the fort, rout out the "regulars," and return before the approach of the wagons should be discovered by their enemies. They had been foolhardy to leave Independence with so small a force; but they had waited, with the promise

of an additional company which never came, until there was almost as much to fear from drifting snow-storms as from savage foes ; more, indeed, since the latter (if true to tradition or precedent) should by this time have moved their camps south of the river, doctored of feathers, and washed free from war-paint. From the weather they had so far suffered nothing. It had been unexceptionally clear, though growing colder day by day, and threatening snow of late ; and, as for other dangers, they had not so much as met the track of one unshod pony, until the report the scouts brought in to-night. But they had reached the debatable land, the common hunting-ground of the tribes ; and it would be strange indeed if they crossed it without an adventure.

Not a crack from a driver's whip broke upon the still air as the day drew swiftly to its close. Oh the lagging indifference of the dull-eyed beasts, dragging the slow-moving wagons on, while danger crouched behind every hillock, and life waited for them hardly twenty miles away ! At last one of the oxen staggered, attempted one more uncertain step, and fell. Before he had struck the ground, the driver had unfastened the chain, and was dragging at the heavy yoke. The great wheels swung slowly to one side, the whole train gave this feeble lurch ; and the poor animal was left to his fate. More than one of the others showed signs of giving out ; but they pushed on until they had reached the banks of a small creek fringed with willows, flowing at a little distance into the Arkansas River. And here they prepared to encamp for the night.

The great yellow disk of a November sun hangs upon the peak of a distant "divide" as the wagons are

drawn into a close circle, within which the animals are corraled. They are guarded and tended with extra care to-night; for they are worth all that a man would give for his life. The men gather the half-consumed branches of the leafless willows, over which the Indian fires have swept, to make a feeble blaze by which they may prepare their supper when the darkness shall have hung a blanket between them and their foes. To send up the smoke of a camp-fire now, or to ring out into the resonant air the stroke of an axe, would be to bring their enemies upon them at once. Even the harsh voices of the teamsters, and the curses of the men moving among the animals, are so subdued as to lose the emphasis which is all their power. They realize, with Cogger, that it is "by dodgin', not by fightin'," they are to get in this time, if at all.

A young man, mounted upon a clean-limbed, broad-flanked bay mare, has struck off alone from the camp while these preparations for the night are being made. The small head of the animal droops wearily as she realizes that her day's work is not yet done. She steps cautiously into the stream beside which the camp is forming, and where a thin film of ice is beginning to gather; then gaining the other side, and taking heart, perhaps of necessity, she throws off her weariness with a bound, and stretches into a gallop across the valley, shut in on either side, at the distance of half a mile, by irregular hills. Under a summer sky, with the grass fresh, and matted into a thick carpet, the pale green of the willows lying against the darker color of the hills, and with the water-course gurgling over its shallows, this valley might have a charm of its own. But now, blackened and dreary from fire and approaching night,

darkened and chill with coming winter, it holds nothing to attract the eye. The bridle drops upon the neck of the horse as it bears its rider slowly over the broken land leading to the low crest of the hill before them. That gained, the young man unslings a glass from his side, and scans the darkening landscape. Not a cloud breaks the short waving line of the horizon in the west as the sun drops from the point where it has hung for a moment. With its fall a flood of gold pours out along the sky. Bold and sharp against it stand out the hills, brought strangely near by the deceptive air. How narrow the earth grows for once! A gallop to the ridge beyond, where the horseman is standing, and one might plunge off into space. Bold and sharp, too, rises this mounted figure in its travel-worn cavalry jacket handsomely braided and frogged. A fine target for an arrow you would be, Captain Robert Elyot, did an Indian chance to hide behind the mound you scan so carelessly! Perhaps he thinks the same; for gathering the loosened bridle, with a touch of his heel to the side of the animal, he is off like an arrow down the slope toward the camp.

Hardly has he gained the level ground, when some one comes riding slowly to meet him. It would be impossible to tell which wears the more dejected air,—the lop-eared, lop-headed, drooping-tailed animal approaching, whose appearance is a sermon upon the vanity of life and the futility of beastly effort, or the scantily mustachioed young officer astride him.

“Confound the plains!” the latter mutters gloomily, as he joins Captain Elyot. “I tell you, Elyot, a snail would sicken of the pace we have kept up the past three days.”

"Your horse seems to be rather the worse for it;" and there is a laugh in the eye of the speaker as he regards the sorry beast the new-comer rides.

"Yes, I know, — broken-winded, spavined, blind in one eye, too, I fancy. I'd like to see that dealer again! Lord! I'd like to see anybody out of this infernal region of sand and buffalo-grass. I say, Elyot, is it always like this?"

And he throws a glance of contempt upon their surroundings, which should have stirred the very bosom of the earth.

"Worse, a thousand times worse!" laughs the other. "If we run through this, we shall be snowed in at the fort in less than a week."

"And then?"

"Oh! we smoke, play cards, hate each other heartily, and hide it; and you've no idea what an amount of surplus energy a man may work off in that way. Then there'll be five hundred red-devils, more or less, hanging about the fort to beg or steal, unless, as they say, they're out on the war-path. In that case, we may be ordered south on a campaign, with the weather cold enough to freeze the flesh, and shiver it off your bones."

"Good heavens!" ejaculated the younger man.

"Oh! it's not so bad a life, after all, when you're used to it," the first speaker went on. "There are always ladies at the post; and, if we're not sent off, we get up a dance, or theatricals, or something to make the time pass."

"And do you like it?" asked the younger man, when they had ridden in silence for a moment.

"Do I like it? Do I like the service?" rejoined the other one coldly.

"But it is rather hard, — to send a man into this wilderness the first year," stammered Lieutenant Orme.

"That depends. Every thing is hard when a man is determined not to be satisfied. But you'll keep such sentiments from the major's ears, if you're wise. And you'll be thankful enough, a dozen years hence, that you were sent out here to rough it a while, rather than to some soft spot in the States, within arm's-length of your mother, and with nothing to do but polish your sword, and show off your new uniform."

"My mother!" repeated the boy (for he was hardly more), "I wish I could see her!" And he turned away his head.

"I wish you could," said the other with good-natured roughness. "I never had a mother or a sister whom I could remember," he added in a softer tone. "But I tell you, Orme, this won't do, you know. You can't take such a face as that into Atchison. It's hard enough for a man to hold his own there, without hanging out such a signal as you're carrying. We ought to strike the fort by sunset to-morrow," he added; "that is, if we get in at all."

But, though he said this under his breath, the young lieutenant caught the words.

"What do you mean?"

"You heard the report the scouts brought in" —

"No: I was asleep in one of the wagons the last hour or two before we halted."

"That there are from five hundred to a thousand red-skins between us and Atchison?"

"And you think they'll come down on us?"

The lieutenant's eye had lost its dulness, the peevish tone had left his voice, as he put the question excitedly.

Captain Elyot regarded him oddly for a moment.

"You'll do," he said with a laugh, "though I began to think I had a molly-coddle on my hands. Think we shall see 'em? Why, man, they're not five miles away. See here!" and, wheeling his horse sharply, he struck back upon the way they had just come over, followed by his companion as fast as his forlorn beast could carry him.

As they approached the crest of the hill where he had stood a few moments before, Captain Elyot dismounted, and, leaving his horse, made the ascent on foot. He even dropped to the ground before gaining the summit, with a caution he would have scorned had he been alone. But "the boy may as well learn to take care of himself," thought this young mentor.

The grayness of night was beginning to gather. The swelling land behind them was already indistinct in outline, as the two young men lay side by side upon the coarse scorched grass, while the elder pointed away toward the south-west, where the glare of sunset still lit up the sky. Like mighty steps the hills rose to meet it, the last seeming hardly a mile away. A faint gray cloud lay against the flame-colored sky; a fixed base, hardly perceptible, moored it to the earth.

"Smoke, by thunder!" and the younger man sprang to his knees.

"Lie low!" said Captain Elyot sharply, pulling him to the ground again. "Yes, it is a camp-fire," he added reflectively. "I almost fancied I was mistaken when I had ridden away from it. And we shall have them down upon us to-morrow, unless they have heard nothing of our coming, and have other game in hand, which I very much doubt. But come, it's time we were on the move again;" and he began the descent.

"See here, Elyot," said Lieutenant Orme, as they were mounting the beasts, that were too weary to stray far from the spot where they had been left. "I hope you don't think, because I grumbled just now, that I should show the white feather if" —

"Nonsense, man!" said the other quickly, springing into the saddle with an agility one would hardly have expected from a frame by no means light. "But, when you have been in what you call this 'wilderness' as long as I, you'll learn that there are worse fates than crawling over a tolerable road, with plenty to eat, — such as it is, — a clear sky overhead, and the prospect of keeping your scalp for twenty-four hours, at least. But come on, or Luttrell will fancy we've fallen into a trap already;" and, spurring their jaded horses, they soon gained the camp.

"Ye'll be bringin' the varmints down on us, with yer keerless ways," growled Cogger as they came up. "Thar an't no sense in temptin' the devil! Hev ye seen any thing like a camp-fire off thar?" jerking his head to the southward.

Leaving the lieutenant to tell his own story, Captain Elyot strolled away to a more quiet part of the camp, to reflect, perhaps, by himself, upon the probable events of the next day as foreshadowed by that little cloud of smoke. He wrapped the cape of the coat he had taken from the saddle about his head, — for the air had turned chill as winter, — and threw himself down by one of the deserted wagons.

Here and there, outside the dim circle of ghostly wagons, burned low fires, about which preparations for the evening meal were going on. Overhead the stars grew brighter and brighter as the darkness shut them

in, while above the sound of wrangling voices and the trampling of uneasy hoofs rose, louder and yet more loud, the howl of the gray wolf and the sharp bark of the coyote.

It would be strange, indeed, if, in such a scene, and with the assurance of an enemy so near, unpleasant visions did not dodge the waking thoughts of a man, even though he were, like this one, young, handsome, and heir to a fine property; since half the pangs we suffer are from possibilities. He had seen enough of this kind of warfare to know, that, if attacked by a foe of half the number the scout had reported, they could hardly hope to hold out long enough to fight the whole ground over between this and Fort Atchison. At such a time, youth, good looks, or worldly prospects count for little. Life stretches out wide and green and beautiful when one's eyes seem likely to be forced to close upon it. Personal beauty was a snare to which he had given little thought; and wealth even, though already in his hand, could do nothing for him here.

That barest of all comforting reflections was his, — if the worst came, there was no one to grieve for him: he was alone in the world. Old uncle Jeremy, his nearest of kin, away off in an Eastern city, who had quarrelled with and finally buried all his own children, would hardly weep for his nephew and heir, since he already regarded with a kind of jealousy the man who was some day to enjoy what he was by no means willing to give up. Ah, if money could be changed into a spiritual medium, there would be few legacies left to the world! But since that could not be, in case he was taken off, this wealth, which, it must be avowed, Captain Elyot had looked forward to spending after a way of his own,

would go — the Lord knew where! For uncle Jeremy was neither pious nor charitable.

He had fallen into as low a state of mind as it is possible for a young fellow without a particle of sentiment to descend to, when something occurred which swept the whole dismal reverie away in an instant.

CHAPTER III.

“YOU GAVE MY LITTLE GAL A PRECIOUS SCARE.”

A MOVEMENT in the wagon above him made him raise his head. Every sound might have a double meaning now. Then — no, — yes, it *was* the pretty, neatly dressed foot of a woman being pushed timidly down from the wagon. It found a resting-place, and another followed; the skirt of a gown, gray in the dim light, came within the range of his vision; and at last, with a spring from the precarious perch where it had rested for an instant, the figure of a girl came lightly to the ground.

She was young: the faint outline against the darkening sky told that. She was a lady he knew from her step, as she came cautiously over the rough grass, her dress brushing his foot. But who was she? and where had she been hidden so long? To spring up was his first impulse; but this would doubtless alarm her. No: it would be better to steal quietly away when she had passed on, which he soon saw she had no intention of doing. He rose noiselessly. Screened by the wagons, she watched the dark figures moving in and out of the light from the dim camp-fires as the preparations for supper went on. It was a childish curiosity,

for she did not seem to search for any one. A little shawl hung loosely over her shoulders. She threw it over her head, and, growing bold, stepped out a few paces from the wagons, with the gesture of a truant, ready to fly back at the slightest alarm. The young man laughed to himself at the caution with which she kept her eyes upon the men around the fires, with no thought of danger in the rear. He intended to slip away unperceived, but he delayed a moment too long. Some unconscious movement betrayed him to this girl, watchful as a hound. She turned in affright; and he met a pair of soft, wide-opened eyes shining through the twilight, and a repressed exclamation of terror, as she sprang back toward the wagon, where she stood panting and at bay.

"Please go away!" said a low voice, which fright made to vibrate.

Captain Elyot removed his hat. But it was not in human nature to go; not in strong, young, curious human nature, at least.

"I am afraid I startled you," he said respectfully.

"I beg your pardon, but" —

"Oh, please go away!"

The girl was glancing from side to side, as though in doubt which way to fly. To scale the wagon in the face of the enemy was not to be thought of.

"Certainly, madam. I only desired to apologize. I trust you will believe I had no thought of playing the spy."

His words were severely proper: his air, as he took one step backward in proof of sincerity, was almost abject in its humility. The girl regarded him doubtfully. She held her gown with both hands, in the very attitude of escape.

“Oh, no, no! I am sure you had not!” she said hurriedly, perhaps with an idea of conciliation, since her timid dismissal had not taken effect. “But if you would go away!”

There was hardly the thickness of a cobweb between the quavering voice and tears.

“I believe she is afraid of me!” exclaimed the young man, in blank blundering astonishment; and thereupon took himself off without another word.

He had skirted half the circle of the camp before it occurred to him to cover his head with the cavalry hat he still carried in his hand. Who was she? And why was she here? And, above all, how had her presence been concealed for so long a time? He ran over the train in his mind. There was the party from the States travelling in an old stage-coach; but he set that aside at once. Then there were the wagons belonging to the sutler at Fort Atchison, and the others going to points farther on. In the darkness, and deserted as they were by their drivers, he could not tell from which of these the girl had descended. But he resolved to have an eye upon that part of the train when the command to “catch up” should come the next morning. Then he went off in search of Lieutenant Orme and supper; after which, the incident passed from his mind, as he joined the informal council gathered to talk over the chances of the morrow.

“It’s no use deceivin’ yerselves,” Cogger was saying, as he came up to the group, gathered in a circle about the ashes of what had been at best but the suggestion of a camp-fire. “The rascals’ll scent us out before we’ve been an hour on the trail, ef they ain’t a’ready. Lord knows I ain’t no fellership with fitin’ when I kin

run. But it's agin natur' to expect them oxen to do much toward streakin' it to a place o' safety, let alone the wagons."

The speaker paused after thus stating the case, and, drawing his blanket a little more closely about his shoulders, proceeded to puff away seriously at his pipe. A desultory discussion followed his words. But this he interrupted after a moment.

"I wouldn't give much for our har, sech as 'tis," he said in a cheerful spirit of prophecy, "ef they come down on us, unless the major kin send some o' them lazy fellers at the fort t' give us a h'ist."

"If we had twenty-five more men, I'd defy any number of them," said Captain Luttrell boldly.

"Ef ye had!" Cogger repeats dryly, blowing a cloud of smoke from his nostrils.

"I wish to the Lord we'd never started!" mutters one of the young men from civilization.

"I reckon ye do," says Cogger complacently. "I don't expect to enjoy it much myself. But thar'll be a struggle for't before they git my skelp among 'em. Ef some o' you boys who ain't good fur nuthin else 'ud try for the fort now, ye'd get in, most likely, under kiver o' the dark, and could rout out the reg'lars afore we're clean done for. Ye've got to do somethin' for yerselves," he added when no response came from the party to whom this was addressed. "They do say that Providence takes keer o' them as can't look out for themselves; but I reckon 'tain't in the Injun country."

"Why shouldn't we all try for the fort when the night has fairly set in?" says the penitent adventurer who had spoken before. "There are horses enough, and the scouts know the country."

"*An' leave the teams?*" The pipe almost fell from Cogger's mouth with his gasp of utter astonishment. "'Tain't what I've come for, young man, t' save my skin. I could 'a' done that a durned sight easier by stayin' in the States. I kalkerlate t' git these wagons through, or lay my bones beside 'em."

"Is there any one who will try for the fort?" Captain Luttrell asks, breaking in impatiently. "There's no use in wasting our time in this way. If any one goes, he ought to be off in an hour. The moon'll be up soon after midnight."

"I will," says Tony Baird. Captain Elyot rose to his feet: "And I." "And I," said Lieutenant Orme, springing from his place. "Let me go with you, Elyot," he added eagerly in a lower tone.

"'Tain't no use," Cogger broke in: "two's enough. Ye'll be more likely t' git through."

"I believe it is so," said Captain Luttrell. "We shall have to excuse you this time, lieutenant. And, indeed, we must not weaken our force here more than is necessary."

"We may as well git what sleep we kin," says Cogger, rolling himself up in his blanket when Captain Luttrell had disappeared to write a despatch for the major commanding at Fort Atchison. "We'll have to stretch out a couple of hours arter midnight. Thar ain't no sense in lyin' round, an' just waitin' to be swallowed up. It kind o' keeps up a man's courage to be movin' on, especially a man who ain't no more gift at fitin' than I hev." For Cogger parades his cowardice ostentatiously, though everybody knows that there is not a more fearless man upon the plains.

A short, broad figure, under a regulation cap, had been

moving about upon the edge of the group during this conversation. The man advanced to Captain Elyot now, and, touching his cap, said, —

“A word with ye, cap’n.”

“Is that you, Stubbs?” For it was the sutler from Fort Atchison. “Speak quick, man. I’ve no time to spare.”

But the sutler, by a mysterious motion of the head, drew the young man away from the others. Even in the dim light of the stars, one might see that Stubbs had given particular attention to his personal appearance, — a fact so noticeable by daylight as to draw upon him many a jest. The dust, which had covered them all day after day, was carefully removed from his garments; his mild, broad face was closely shaven; and even his linen did not appear neglected. But all this, it may be imagined, Captain Elyot did not notice now. There was a nervous, anxious manner about the sutler, much more apparent than any peculiarity of dress. Nor was it strange, since a small fortune had been invested in the wagons he was pushing on to the fort. The chance of losing this, to say nothing of personal danger, might well alarm him.

“Well,” said Captain Elyot, when they had gained a spot quite beyond the hearing of the others, and still the sutler hesitated. “Whatever it is, Stubbs, speak out. You forget that I have to be off in half an hour. Have the horses stampeded, or a spy crept into camp, or” —

“No; but — you gave my little gal a precious scare!” said the man at last.

His little girl! The words were an enigma to the young man. He almost thought anxiety had given Stubbs’s dull brain a turn. Then the scene of an hour

before came back to him. His little girl! Could this be Stubbs's daughter? Various traditions, rumors, and authenticated stories began to gather and concentrate in his mind. He had not sat by Stubbs's fire of evenings for six months past, without hearing of Blossom's beauty, her learning (somewhat exaggerated, it must be owned), and her pretty ways. Though, to do Stubbs justice, he had seldom referred to her, except indirectly, or by a pathetic sigh over her absence. It was Mrs. Stubbs, who, with certain possibilities in her mind, had taken every opportunity to expatiate upon Blossom's charms. Some red-cheeked Amazon, after the type of the mother, Captain Elyot had fancied her to be; or some moon-faced damsel, a sketch in chalk of Stubbs, whose good-nature would be equalled only by her stupidity. But this pretty little creature, with her frightened eyes and the unconscious grace that bespoke her a lady—this, Stubbs's daughter!

"I reckon it was a s'prise to ye," said Stubbs, with a touch of pride in his voice. "Ye see, I'm fetchin' her home. At least," he added,—and all his former anxiety seemed to return, and weigh down his words till they were almost too heavy to be uttered,—“that's what I've started fur.”

"But how have you managed to hide her all this time? And good Lord, man!"—as a vision of the morrow rose in his mind—"what are you going to do with her now?"

The young man had forgotten his haste to be gone. He could think of nothing but the dreadful fright and worse fate to which the poor girl might be exposed on the morrow,—the girl who had trembled at sight of him.

"What *will* you do with her?" he asked sharply. The man was a fool to bring his daughter into such danger.

"That's what I wanted to ask ye," said poor Stubbs abjectly. "I know I ought never to 'ave brought her. She ain't like her mother."

"I should think not." A vision of Mrs. Stubbs, with her soldierly figure and fearless face, crossed the young man's mind.

"I ought to have sold out, and" —

"But it's too late for that," said the young man impatiently. And the poor girl had no one to depend upon but this stupid fellow (whom he had found tolerably companionable before now). Some wild scheme of freeing himself from his offer to ride to the fort tempted Captain Elyot; and yet he could not do it in honor. No, he must go. But he would say a word to Orme, or even speak to Luttrell. Stubbs was not to be trusted with such a charge. He forgot that the girl was Stubbs's own daughter.

"You're going to try for the fort?" Stubbs broke in upon his reverie timidly.

"Yes."

"Don't ye think, cap'n" — the man's voice trembled over the words, — "don't ye believe ye could take the little gal along?"

"Good Lord, Stubbs! It is impossible."

"She could ride with the best of ye. I learned her myself," Stubbs said eagerly.

"But we may never reach the fort."

"There's no reason why ye shouldn't. It's the wagons the devils are arter. If ye had a fresh horse, now — I wouldn't look at your money yesterday for

Black Jess, I'd half promised her to Luttrell at a higher figger; but she's yours, an' nothin' to pay" —

"Keep your bribes for those who want them. A man don't take pay for a service like that," said Captain Elyot proudly. "And it's out of the question, Stubbs. It can't be done."

He was moving off, when the sutler seized him by the arm.

"You ain't got no wife nor children; but you must have a heart in ye somewhere to feel for them as has. Why, I've seen ye carry a wounded dog in yer arms; an' wouldn't ye do as much for one o' God's human creeters? Oh! ye don't know what it is to have the little gal hangin' on ter yer heart day an' night, till ye couldn't git no rest for thinkin' of her. Sech a soft, frightsome little thing, scared of her shadder! An' to think" — And the man covered his face with his hands.

"Yes, I know," Captain Elyot said hesitatingly. "But Captain Luttrell would never consent: so much depends upon our getting in!"

"He'd never say no to you; an' there ain't a man among 'em, but 'ud be sorry to know thar was a woman in camp if the Injuns come down on us to-morrow. Offer him what ye will, cap'n. He ain't afraid o' the touch o' gold: 'twon't blister his hand. Tell him he never should repent it as long as he lived. There are some favors a man don't forget in a hurry."

"But the scout?"

"Tony? He'd sell his soul for a silver dollar: it's a pity if he wouldn't do a feller-creeter a good turn for a dozen gold ones."

"Well, well," said Captain Elyot reluctantly. "I'll

do what I can for you, Stubbs. This is no place for a woman. Any way, I'll speak to Luttrell."

"Then you'll do it? You'll run the little gal into the fort?"

"I'll do what I can: God knows she ought not to be here." Already he was assuming responsibility over this girl with whom he had not exchanged a dozen words.

But Stubbs was wringing his hand in a passion of gratitude.

"God bless ye! God bless ye! I knew ye would. It'll be made up to ye, though ye won't take the horse. An' I don't care what comes now, if the child'll only get to her mother. I sha'n't never see the fort myself; but" —

"Nonsense, man! What are you talking about?"

"It's been a-weighin' me down," Stubbs replied gloomily, — "down an' down, till the heart's clean gone out o' me. One stroke more'd do it; an' I reckon I'll git that to-morrow."

"You're low-spirited from worrying over this matter," said Captain Elyot cheerfully. "You'll cheer up by daylight. But suppose you try for the fort yourself, you might go in my place: I'll speak to Luttrell about it."

But Stubbs shook his head.

"I ain't never yet left the teams; an' I'll stand by 'em to the last."

"Then I must be off. I'll see Captain Luttrell at once. I reckon I can bring him round: so you may as well prépare your daughter. Don't frighten her. Or has she heard?"

"She don't so much as know there's an Injun within a hundred miles."

"So much the better. Bring her here in half an hour, and mind you don't keep us waiting. I hope you can mount her; for I haven't a spare animal. The mare I rode to-day is quite used up."

"Never you fear about a horse for Blossom: I'll see to that. Jest you make it right with the cap'n an' the rest of 'em; and don't stand for the price."

"I'll try: a man can't promise more."

They separated hastily, — Stubbs to go and prepare Blossom for her night-ride, and Captain Elyot to conciliate the commanding officer and the scout.

"What the —— is his daughter here for?" said Captain Luttrell angrily. "But I suppose you may as well take her;" for Captain Elyot had dropped a careless word or two of Stubbs's anxiety, and hinted at a debt of gratitude, which nobody was so well able to pay as the sutler. "I hope he won't forget it if we ever get in, that's all," grumbled the captain, folding up the despatch he had been writing on his knee. "He put a devilish price on that mare of his yesterday: I don't care if you tell him so."

The chink of gold proved sweetly persuasive to the scout. Words were unnecessary. There remained only Cogger to be conciliated; and him Captain Elyot met close to the appointed rendezvous.

"I s'pose the cap'n's given ye his orders?" said the wagon-master, coming to a halt.

He had not been able to act upon the advice bestowed so lavishly upon the others, — to catch what rest might be had between now and midnight.

“Yes: I have the despatches here;” and Captain Elyot laid his hand upon his breast. “But I was looking for you. Do you know, Cogger, there’s a woman in the train?”

This was no time to choose his words, or to break more gently the subject on his mind.

“Now, if them blasted ” —

“It’s only Stubbs’s daughter, and he is taking her home to her mother.”

“Ye don’t say! Wharever’s he kep’ her?”

“I don’t know; in one of the wagons, probably. But he wants us to take her into the fort to-night. Captain Luttrell does not object, if we are willing to make the attempt. This’ll be no place for a woman, if the Indians attack us.”

Cogger would have whistled, but caution checked him in the act.

“’Twas a kind o’ mean trick in Stubbs,” he said thoughtfully, after a moment of silence. “We didn’t kalkerlate to take no glass-ware this trip: we didn’t pervide for’t. An’ he knew it. I reckon he can take keer o’ his own darter,” he added, with the air of a man who washes his hands of the whole affair.

“Tony thinks we can do it,” said Captain Elyot quietly; “and Luttrell has consented.”

“He don’t think so for nothin’. I take it ’tain’t pure love o’ God in either of ’em. Not that I’ve any thing to say agin you, Captain Elyot. But why didn’t Stubbs come to me with his darter, square-like, before we left Independence? I’d ’a’ said to him, ‘Keep the gal t’ the States, for the present. ’Tain’t no time t’ be teamin’ wimmin-folks over the trail, nigh on ter winter as ’tis, an’ with sech a fearsome sperit for Injuns as I be.’”

"But the girl is here."

"Wall, wall, 'tain't nuthin t' me. But I wouldn't 'a' thought it o' Stubbs. Him an me's been pardners for years. But ye'll strike a crooked trail in most men, an' where ye ain't lookin' for't; an', ten chances t' one, it'll be on account of a woman." He was moving away; but he turned back to add, "Ef ye hold t' the same mind, ye'd better shet Tony Baird's mouth, an' creep out o' camp kind o' unbeknownst t' the rest. An' it's time ye were off."

"I gave Stubbs half an hour to meet us here. It's hardly up yet. And I cautioned Tony to say nothing about the affair to any one. Here he is now," he went on, as the scout came up through the darkness from the corral, leading his horse. A servant followed, with Captain Elyot's; and behind them appeared a third, leading Black Jess, which Captain Luttrell had coveted at the sutler's hands. A woman's saddle was fitted to her back. Stubbs had, perhaps, foreseen an emergency like this, and provided for it.

"I was ordered to bring her here," said the man who held the bridle.

Captain Elyot recognized him as one of Stubbs's teamsters, a man regularly employed about the fort.

"But are you sure she is safe?"

"As gentle as a lamb, sir; and it won't be the first time Miss Blossom's rode her, either, or since we left the States," he added in a still lower tone, and with a quiet chuckle. "Jess knows her,—don't ye, Jess?" And he stroked the face of the beautiful animal, who rubbed her forehead against his arm with a whinny, which seemed in response to his words.

Night had settled lower and lower upon the camp:

beyond the darker shadows of the circling wagons, and the still forms of the men near at hand, nothing could be discerned. The sentinels, chilled by the keen air, huddled in pairs close to the ground, wrapped in their blankets, open-eyed, attent, but silent as sphinxes. The time had come for the party to set out for the fort. They waited only for Blossom.

CHAPTER IV.

“I’LL BE THE FIRST TO MEET YOU WHEN YOU COME IN.”

THE wagon in which Blossom is hidden is by daylight the shabbiest in the train. No one looking upon it from the outside would fancy for a moment that any precious thing had been committed to its keeping. A time-worn, dust-stained “tilt” is stretched over its ribs, showing many a rent and clumsily-bestowed patch; the wheels protest loudly against each revolution; and the joints seem about to wrench themselves apart at every lurch over the uneven ground. But this shabbiness, after all, is not weakness. It has been added to and heightened by Stubbs as a snare and a delusion; for Stubbs is not the first man whom love has made ingenious and even artful. One incongruity in the arrangement of the team did awaken comment for a time. The shabby wagon was not drawn by oxen, as were most of the others in the train, but by stout, strong mules, capable of great speed if put to the test. But as they never have been put to the test, and as the size and general appearance of the wagon gives the impression of weight, comment gives out after the first day or two, and goes to sleep again, without arousing suspicion.

But it is over the interior arrangements that Stubbs's ingenuity has spread itself, and borne fruit. The outer covering may be torn, dexterously and never to the windward: the inner (save where some provision has been made for ventilation) is whole, and laughs at the rain. If any one were curious enough to search beneath this, he would still be baffled by the craftiness of the little sutler. To all appearance it is filled with rough deal boxes, packed so closely together as to leave hardly a crack between. But really each one has been sawed off a few inches from the end; and, all having been fastened firmly together, they form a stout wall rising half way about the interior. One of the rough planks, when unfastened from within, swings back to form a door to the tiny apartment, which is thus secured from all surprise. The narrow walls inside are hung about with scarlet blankets, the floor covered with fine buffalo-skins, — a wise precaution; for the cold has been strengthening every day. A pile of wolf-skins in one corner serves for a lounging-place by day and a warm couch by night; or a hammock, hanging from one loop now, can be stretched across the diminutive apartment if need be. A swinging-shelf and glass serve for a toilet-table; a box, deftly concealed, for a wardrobe; while another shelf holds a few books; and thrust into pockets, which the girl has amused herself by attaching to the hangings of her apartment, are all the little knick-knacks of use or fancy which a thoroughly-indulged young person of delicate tastes might gather about herself, fancying them, after a time, indispensable. A frail work-basket, built, it would seem, upon a foundation of blue ribbon and straws, which the wind might blow away, hangs suspended over the wolf-skin couch, where at this

moment lies a half-completed mystery in worsted work. The needle is thrust in as though it had been hastily deserted; the bright wools have fallen in a neglected tangle upon the floor. Ah, Blossom, Blossom! are these the neat habits and orderly ways you are carrying home, after so many years of training in the States? But where is the little mistress of the place?

She is standing before the glass, if the truth must be told, enveloped in a very faint glory from the rays of a flickering candle. The curtains and screens so carefully provided shut in the feeble light from any stray passer outside. A soft gray gown and little fur-lined sack, from which she seemed to have slipped just now, lie on the floor at her feet. She is arrayed in a pair of full dark-blue trousers and a belted blouse. Under the stars this might well pass for the dress of a boy. She is drawing her brown hair at this moment into a loose twist upon the crown of her head, covering it at last with a broad-brimmed, low-crowned felt hat. Then she surveys herself in the glass,—not with curiosity, or a shadow of coquettish amusement at the odd, piquant little figure reflected there. She turns about, sets her hat more firmly upon her head, with a grave, critical air, and with even a touch of sadness or foreboding in the childish countenance, from which time has scarcely smoothed away the baby-dimples yet. At a peculiar tap upon the wall behind her, she starts hurriedly, and covers the candle with a screen, when the knock is repeated. She draws the bolt fastening her into her hiding-place. The door swings into the little room, and Stubbs follows it.

“See! I have dressed as you bade me,” Blossom says. She uncovers the candle, and stands in its trem-

bling light. Her eyes are dark, and her face is pale, under its yellow, flickering rays. "Must I really go, and without you? I am afraid when I think of it." There is a break in her voice, the slipping of a string to jar the melody. "The night is so dreadful; and I heard the men outside, while you were gone, say that the Indians had risen all along the trail. Is that why you are sending me away?" She threw her arms about her father, and tried to read the truth in his face.

"They lied, child: there wa'n't no truth in it. They were just tryin' to scare one another; that's all." And yet should he let her go away with no suspicion of the truth? She would be sure to learn something of it from her companions. Would it not be better for him to tell her now? "There ain't any Injuns within a dozen miles. Some o' the boys reckoned they saw smoke off t' the so'th'ard, where there's a camp most likely."

"Then there is a camp? And so near!"

He felt the girl tremble in his arms. No, he could not tell her.

"Mebbe," he said slowly. Oh the artful simplicity and doubt in his voice! "A peaceful kind o' camp, with women an' children."

Blossom breathed again. But still she hung upon his neck.

"Let me stay with you," she pleaded. "I wouldn't be afraid with you."

"Ain't I been a good father to ye, child?" The man's breath came hoarse and heavy, as though the weight upon his breast was more than he could bear. "Not as though I'd had advantages, an' lived t' the

States ; but ain't I been as good as I've know'd how t' be ? ”

“ Oh, better than anybody in the world ! ” sobbed the girl.

“ And couldn't ye trust me, Blossom, jest this once, and go like a good gal ? I ought never to 'a' brought ye. This ain't no place for ye. But I wanted ye so, child ! ye don't know ; ” and he stroked the shoulder of the girl with his broad rough hand.

Only Blossom's low sobs broke the silence for a moment. Then she raised her head. “ I'll go, father ; and I'll try not to be afraid. You'll be coming soon ? ” she added timidly.

But Stubbs had turned his back upon her.

“ Don't mind about me : you'll have yer mother ; I ought to 'a' fetched her oftener t' see ye. She's an uncommon woman, yer mother is. She'll do more for ye'n ever I could.” But his voice broke over the last words.

“ But you speak as if — as if you were not coming at all,” burst out poor Blossom, frightened at she knew not what.

“ To be sure I'm coming,” said Stubbs, with a hoarse, broken laugh. “ You'll be lookin' out for us at sunset to-morrow, ef there don't no storm set in. Or don't be watchin', child ; p'raps we sha'n't get in till daylight.” He was kneeling on the floor as he spoke, before a box bound about with iron, and with a padlock hanging to it. Out from its depths he now brought a small pistol, beautified with chased and frosted work in silver. He put it into her hands. “ Don't be scairt,” for she had nearly cried out when she saw what the bauble was. “ I bought it for ye, child. I thought 'twould please

ye. See, there's silver an' shinin' stones on it." He loaded it with careful, trembling hands. Then he came and stood beside her, and showed her how it was to be held and cocked and fired. Twice over he did this.

"But what am I to do with it, father dear?"

"I've known o' women's putting 'em to their heads sooner'n t' fall into the hands o' the Injuns," he said carelessly, while he fitted a cap to it; but great drops of perspiration started out on his forehead. "Just wear it in yer belt, child, so: 'twont do no harm, an' I thought 'twould look kind o' neat." He took her face in his hard hands, and kissed her tenderly, — her smooth forehead, her soft pretty hair, from which the hat had fallen. "It's time ye were settin' off," he said: "ye'll think sometimes of yer poor old father?"

"I shall think of you all the way," said Blossom; "and I'll be the first to meet you when you come in."

"I wouldn't be lookin' out: 'tain't good luck, they say. But it's time ye were leavin'. I'll just see if they're ready for ye." He put the little fur-lined jacket upon her with clumsy tenderness. It brought back her baby-days, when he had dressed her many a time. "My little gal!" he said softly, as his hand brushed her cheek. He had raised the blanket to leave her, when a new thought seemed to strike him. "There ain't any such thing as a Bible among your traps?"

Blossom's eyes opened wide; but she silently handed him a Testament from the swinging-shelf above her.

He shook his head. "Ye might read a word or two before ye start. My old mother set a store by that book. She used to read it to me when I was a little un. There's somethin' in it about 'long-sufferin' an' tender mercies.' 'Long-sufferin','" he repeated slowly.

“That’s a good word. It sounds kind of encouragin’ to a man that’s been roughin’ it here for most twenty years.” Then he went out by the way he had come in, carefully closing the door after him.

Blossom sat down upon the pile of skins after he had gone. Her fears had been much more over the darkness through which she must journey, and the dread of making it with strange companions, than of any actual danger. But she was accustomed to obedience, and she had promised to go: so now she put aside her terrors as well as she could, and set herself to obeying his parting injunction. She opened the Testament at random, and read the chapter her eyes first fell upon. It was not at all appropriate to her situation, but she read it carefully to the end; while her fears crept away with soft-shod feet, and her anxiety over her father gradually followed. That had lingered last, an indefinable pain and fear connected with him; but this, too, slipped away as she read: while he, searching about in the darkness for Captain Elyot and the scout, answering the challenges of the sleepy sentinels, and making hasty, thoughtful preparations for her departure, had bidden her already a last farewell in his heart.

When still she was not summoned, she busied herself quite simply, putting her apartment in order, as though she were to return to it again. These natural, everyday duties helped to compose her mind; and she was ready and quite calm when her father came, a few moments later, with a cup of coffee in his hand. He brought out some simple food, and set it before her. “Ye must eat and drink, child, or ye’ll be faint, an’ give out before ye git there.” He held the cup while she drank. It was baby Blossom again in his arms.

"D'ye remember how I carried ye all night long when ye were down with the fever? There couldn't nobody else give ye so much as a drop o' water."

She was gentle and dainty, and not like him or his ways; but she had chosen him before all the others in that time, so long ago. Yes, Blossom remembered well. But it brought the tears to her eyes to-night. Why did he recall it now?

He pressed her to eat. He waited upon her like a servant; no, he served her like a slave, — a slave who loved his chains. But the bread grew more and more bitter every moment to Blossom, who swallowed her tears with it.

Every sound was still: even the animals within the corral seemed sleeping, as they crept out of the wagon. The darkness was only a dusky gray. The great white stars were pale to-night. The sleeping men did not stir at the sound of their feet as they passed. A sentinel sprang up in their way, but at a low word he fell back. Three horses were tied to one of the wagons. Cogger and the scout and another figure stood by them.

"Is that you, Stubbs? This way."

Black Jess gave a whinny of welcome as the girl brushed by. Some one lifted her into the saddle. She was trembling with fright or cold.

"You'll take care of her?" Stubbs said hoarsely.

"I will," replied a suppressed voice at her elbow, as her foot found the stirrup. "With my life," it added.

"An' — if the wust comes" —

"I'll do by her as though she were my own sister;" and Captain Elyot sprang into the saddle, and took Blossom's bridle in his hand.

"I b'lieve ye."

"Come, come," and Cogger pressed in between them. "'Tain't no time for manners. The moon'll be up afore ye know it. I hope ye ain't one o' the screechin' kind?" to Blossom.

"I — I don't know."

"Ye'll keep quiet, little gal, whatever comes?" said Stubbs, stroking the horse upon which Blossom was seated — with what tenderness!

"Yes, father."

"Because," Cogger went on, "I've known a whole camp o' red-devils turned out jest by the screech of a woman. Not that I was meanin' t' speak ha'sh t' ye," he went on apologetically, examining her bridle, and giving a critical shake to the saddle; "but ye see, fur myself, I'm powerful skeert ov Injuns, and hate most awful to wake 'em up. Wall, that's about all. — Ye can tell the major," addressing himself to Captain Elyot, "ef he could spare us a company o' reg'lars, we'd be obleeged to him."

"To-morrow," whispered Blossom, leaning down, and throwing her arms around her father's neck. "Don't tell me not to watch for you. I'll be the first to meet you."

Poor Stubbs tried to speak, but the words would not come. He felt her warm kisses on his face, then she was gone. The three figures moved off slowly, until the darkness shut Blossom from her father's sight.

He strained his eyes till they could serve him no longer; then he dropped upon the ground, and listened to the muffled sound of the horses' hoofs, till that, too, died away. Cogger moved uneasily about at a little distance, and finally joined him.

"Ye'd better sleep while ye ken," he said, ostentatiously wrapping his blanket about himself.

"Thar ain't no sleep for me," replied the little sutler, resting his face upon his hands, and staring straight into the darkness where Blossom had disappeared.

"Kind o' low in yer mind, ain't ye?" queried Cogger. "But, Lord, man! they'll git in. I'll trust Tony for that."

"I ought never to 'a' brought her," pursued Stubbs gloomily.

"Thet's so," said the wagon-master. "Thet's what I said t' the cap'n. 'Twarn't quite the squar' thing. Howsomever, I don't bear no grudge agin ye."

But even this generous concession failed to comfort Stubbs.

"You see, I kind o' hankered after her," he went on, partly to himself.

"I s'pose so," said Cogger. "They seem to; though I don't know much about wimmin myself. They 'pear mostly to be gittin' in folks's way. There was a gal, once, down Washita way," he added after a reflective pause. "H'm, ye should 'a' heerd that gal laugh! But I ain't much to look at myself," he went on, "an' that goes a long way with wimmin. Though I hev thought—but thar, most likely she wouldn't 'a' looked at sech a poor-sperited creeter."

And, after this remarkable piece of confidence, Cogger did at last roll himself into a gray cocoon, and resign himself to sleep.

When he was still, Stubbs rose quietly, and strolled off to his wagons, entering the one Blossom had occupied. There was no confusion of hurried departure here. Every thing was tidy and in its place. Even

the gray gown, hardly yet cold from her form, was folded neatly, and lay upon the pile of wolf-skins where the little figure had rested so many times. He took the soft fabric between his hands. It was like Blossom, it was almost a part of herself; and he stroked it gently, until, in the working of his mind, his hand forgot the motion. No one had thought to put out the candle. It burned low, and there was a winding-sheet about it, if the man had but looked to see. After a time he roused himself, searched around for a moment, then took an old memorandum-book from his pocket, and began to write.

It was a brief record which he made; but he hesitated long over it, and finished it with a sigh at last. He tore out the leaf, and, after a moment of consideration, pinned it to the little gray gown. Then he went out, and lay down with the rest.

CHAPTER V.

“A GIRL! WHO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT IT?”

THE moon has been up for an hour, and shines white and cold over the level stretch of sandy plain around Fort Atchison. The river sleeps in its shallow bed under a thin coverlet of ice. The very night itself seems sleeping, or would but for this one open eye coldly staring down. The sentinels, with the capes of their coats muffled about their heads, pace off the weary time, longing for the hour of relief, yet stolidly going their rounds.

One, more alive than the rest, suddenly halts in his steps to listen. A faint, continuous, and increasing sound has scattered the stillness hanging over the fort. It breaks at length into the thud of hoofs upon the frozen ground. A dark speck upon the eastern horizon is growing each moment. It divides into two — or three — moving objects. “Buffaloes,” mutters the man with faint interest. A *détour* throws the figures, still drawing near, against the pale sky. “Injuns!” he utters aloud, and begins to feel the stirring of a soul within his torpid body. Other ears have caught the sound. Heads are thrust out of hastily opened windows, voices follow; nearer and nearer stretch the mounted figures

in a straight line for the gate. "Tony Baird, by ——!" exclaims the sentinel, and calls for the corporal of the guard, as the scout, followed by Captain Elyot, supporting what seems to be a boyish figure upon the horse beside him, sweeps up to the gate.

In a moment they are within and surrounded. Even Mrs. Bryce, wife of the major commanding at the post, follows her husband, having donned those articles of apparel first in hand, and which, it must be confessed, are neither numerous nor becoming. But she is an old campaigner, and knows the advantage of being to the front at once.

Claudia Bryce, the major's daughter, and Miss Laud, who is paying her a long visit, run out, muffled up to their eyes, and join the gathering crowd about Captain Elyot, just as the young man has told his story, and delivered his despatches into the hands of the major. "We crept by their camp not six miles from the wagons; but, what with the distance and the darkness, we could not estimate their number."

The bugle sounds "To horse!" rousing the last sleeper, and awakening general confusion. There are calls and shouts, and a hasty running to and fro, with the trampling of iron-shod feet, while the women press curiously around Captain Elyot, who is lifting Blossom from her horse. They stare at her nondescript dress, when all at once her hat falls off, and her pretty brown hair comes rolling down over her shoulders.

"A girl! Who would have thought it?"

"Scandalous!" whispers Miss Bryce, who would have been a fright in such a costume.

"Poor child! What a sweet face!" says another.

"Who is she?" rustles all through the little crowd.

Even her strange dress and unconscious condition cannot hide the attributes of a lady. She must be some one of distinction, bound for a post farther on.

"Nae gude, I daresay," ventures Jinny, Mrs. Bryce's overgrown Scotch maid, who stands on the outskirts of the assembled company, her hands upon her hips, prepared to defy the Devil and all his works as displayed in the person of Blossom.

But there is no end to the officiousness of those near by. "Bring her to our house," says the major's wife, bustling up with an air of command. "Get your salts, Claudia, quick: she seems to have fainted."

"Where is her mother? Will nobody call her mother?" Captain Elyot exclaims impatiently, trying to push his way as well as he can, for the burden in his arms, through the crowd of females, each one of whom, unless it be strong-minded Jinny, has something to suggest or offer. "She's only frightened half to death." Then, in the silence that has dropped on the little company, he explains hastily, "She is Stubbs's daughter. Where is her mother?"

"Oh!" and the crowd fell back to a woman, literally to a woman; for Jinny alone stood her ground.

"Who'd 'a' believed it! Stubbs's lass! I'll fetch her mither, mon, if ye'll bide here. Or maybe ye'd best follow. An' t' think," said she to herself, when she had started off at a galloping pace more swift than graceful, — "t' think I should 'a' ta'en her to be the Devil's ain! But beauty's aye deceitfu'," she added by way of excuse. "An' who'd 'a' thought Stubbs's lass would 'a' been sae bonnie!"

Half way to the sutler's quarters they met Mrs. Stubbs, to whom the birds of the air had perhaps carried the news.

“An’ did you bring her in, Cap’n Elyot?” said the woman, receiving the girl in her strong arms, without a word of love or welcome over the unconscious form. “It’s a good night’s work you’ve done for yourself. We sha’n’t be forgetting it in a hurry. But is it true that the Injuns are out on the trail?”

She was holding the girl close in her arms. The rising wind had seized the red shawl she had thrown hastily over her head when she ran out at the exciting news. It caught the long loose locks of her straight black hair, and blew it about her face, where the color came and went, as she asked this question, like the pale and glow of the iron under the hammer.

“Yes: we passed a large camp less than a dozen miles from here. But the wagons were safe enough a couple of hours ago. I’m going back now with re-enforcements to bring them in. Any message for your husband?”

The woman was moving off already with her burden. There was no change in her countenance at this corroboration of her fears.

“You might tell him not to throw himself into the thick of it. He ain’t so spry as he used to be,” she added as an apology for the caution. “But, man, come on to the house, and I’ll get ye a bite an’ something to keep the cold out.”

“Thanks, but we’re off now;” and he took the bridle of the fresh horse from the servant who led it up at the moment.

“Bide at our house, mon. I’d set ye out something in a wink; an’ the leddies ’ud be proud to see ye,” said Jinny, who lingered near.

“Thanks, Jinny; but I shall fare as well as the rest

of them. I'll pay my respects to the ladies to-morrow, if we have good luck. Take care that Sergeant McDougal doesn't run his head against a bullet, Jinny, and good-by to you."

At this thrust the girl threw her apron over her head, with a bashful giggle.

"O Jinny!" He reined in his horse. "Look in on Mrs. Stubbs by and by, and, if you can do any thing for the daughter, I'll make it up—to the sergeant!" And his horse's hoofs rattled over the ground as he dashed to the head of the troop, and rode out at the gate.

The clank and jingle of accoutrements, with the thud of hoofs, died away, and the company of riders was soon only a cloud of dust under the paling moon. The gates were closed, and securely fastened: the crowd scattered, the ladies suddenly aware that broad daylight would hardly find presentable a costume which might be picturesque enough at a midnight alarm. Reveille sounded. The routine of the day began, the garrison being quickened into unusual activity by the news Captain Elyot had brought in. Sleep was not to be thought of in the midst of such excitement. Even the ladies at headquarters had no intention of seeking their beds again, though daylight had hardly streaked the east.

"We may as well make ourselves comfortable," said Claudia Bryee, the major's daughter, wrapping a plaid about her shoulders, and curling herself upon the outside of the bed in the low narrow room that was Claudia's "bower," while waiting for Jinny to come and light her fire.

"My flesh fairly creeps," said Miss Laud, preparing

to follow her example. "Are you sure, Claudia, there is no danger of their attacking the fort?"

"Perfectly sure," Claudia responded coolly. "It is only a thieving expedition — after the wagons."

"But, if they attack the wagons, there will be fighting."

"Perhaps; though they are much more likely to run when they see the troops, and know that the post is aroused."

Then they came back to the incident which had so startled them.

"It was quite dramatic," said Miss Laud lightly. "Really, Claudia, in a play nothing could be more effective. And what an odd dress! One would have taken her to be a boy, but for that unlucky hat. Pray, do you army ladies affect such costumes?"

"Not at all," Claudia replied with emphasis. "No lady in the army, or anywhere else, would think of wearing such a dress."

"Then I conclude, my dear, that you do not consider this young person to be a lady."

"A lady!" repeated Miss Bryce in scorn. "What are you thinking of, Kitty. You heard him call for her mother. She is the sutler's daughter. You remember Mrs. Stubbs? You bought your worsteds of her yesterday."

"It can't be possible, Claudia! That dreadful woman! But the daughter is very pretty," Miss Laud persisted, — "far prettier than any girl at the post, unless, dear, we except ourselves, as is quite proper and right," she added with a laugh.

"She is extremely artful," retorted Miss Bryce, who did not smile over her friend's pleasantry. "Did you

see how her hair fell down just at the right moment, when Captain Elyot lifted her from her horse? ”

Miss Bryce's own locks were heavy and blonde ; but they lay, for the most part, upon the dressing-table before her.

“ O Claudia ! you can't believe that she pulled out the pins ! ”

“ I can believe any thing of that class of people ,” Claudia answered scornfully.

“ My dear, you are at odds with your conditions. You should have been born an English duchess, to talk of ‘ that class of people ! ’ Whatever the cause, the tableau was very effective ,” yawned Miss Laud, pulling the wrap up to her pink and white chin ; for the morning was chilly, and Jinny unaccountably delayed. “ And mademoiselle, the sutler's daughter, has come to stay ? ”

“ Yes, I believe so, unless some unexpected piece of good fortune removes the whole family .”

“ You will hardly think it necessary to call ? ”

“ To be sure not .”

“ I am afraid it will be rather dull for the poor thing. She certainly had the appearance of a lady .”

“ I am not responsible for such a misfortune ,” Claudia responded coldly.

“ And that was Captain Elyot ,” Miss Laud went on meditatively. “ Claudia, why did you never tell me how handsome he is ? ”

“ And he never looked at me, though I stood directly before him ,” burst out Miss Bryce, who could keep back no longer the cause of her extraordinary ill-humor. “ He has been away three months, and comes back to ask for — Mrs. Stubbs ! ”

“ Be reasonable, dear. Think of the excitement of

the moment, his haste, the errand he had come on, and that girl in his arms to be disposed of. He was bewildered with questions" —

"But he was not blind."

"And, even if you were close beside him, he might not have recognized you — in the dark."

"O Kitty! it was a bright moonlight."

"Between moonlight and dawn, dear, and we wrapped up like Esquimaux." (And really Claudia was very plain, and not at all like herself in a neglectful or hurried toilet, thought Miss Laud in the very depths of her soul.) "Still he might have given you a look, a word, — and you almost engaged to him," she added inconsistently.

"I never said that, Kitty."

"But you told me of his constant visits and his devotion, before he went East. If such conduct has any meaning — which it frequently has not, I must confess," she added frankly.

"How do I know that he may not have been equally devoted to this girl?" asked Claudia, hot and suspicious. "Think of the long journey across the plains together! Chance, rather than choice, breeds love, Kitty. Oh, you know it does! And, though he rode in before my eyes, he never gave me a thought. It was all for this girl and her mother."

"To get rid of her, dear. But don't cry, pray don't. Jinny will come, and everybody will wonder at your red eyes. And will you let me give you a piece of advice?"

Claudia regarded her friend inquiringly.

"Go and call upon this girl at once, to-day. Oh! there is nothing in it. She looked like a child."

"Go and call?" repeated Miss Bryce. Indignation dried up her tears. "Never!"

"No, I don't suppose you will," Miss Laud said slowly, entirely unmoved by Claudia's wrath, directed now to herself. "I don't suppose I should myself. But I am convinced that would be the best thing to do, although very likely I shouldn't do it. But at least you will not show any annoyance when he comes back? You will appear the same as usual to him?"

"Why shouldn't I appear the same?" replied Claudia, turning upon her friend. "He is nothing to me," she added, with a rather late assumption of dignity. Then she had nearly broken down again. "There are others more mindful of me than he shows himself to be," she said with a choking voice.

"To be sure there are." Miss Laud hastened to concur with her. "Lieutenant Gibbs, for instance, who would cut off his head for you any day. I am not so sure that he would sacrifice his mustache."

"Why do you speak of that idiot?" Claudia said crossly.

And then Jinny did at last appear to light the fire, an interruption Miss Laud secretly rejoiced in. Claudia's manner had become decidedly disagreeable, and she was glad that the conversation had come to an end. She hastened to dress, in order to leave the room before Jinny had finished her task. Left to herself, Claudia might recover her usual tolerable humor, and even consider her advice. It could not be that she was so weak as to show herself mortified and angry to her friends, who would easily divine the cause, and, above all, to Captain Elyot himself!

CHAPTER VI.

COMING HOME.

ALL day long Blossom lay upon the bed her mother had aired and spread with her own hands in expectation of her coming. Much of the time she was alone, lying with close-shut eyes, hearing her mother's sharp, quick voice, and the half-breed Tolee's muttered replies through the thin partition, as in a dream. Tolee moved about lazily among her pots and pans in the kitchen. Not even the coming home of her young mistress, or the expected arrival of her master with the friends he might bring to sup with him, could rouse her. But Mrs. Stubbs was alert and everywhere, tasting of the simmering preparations for a feast already under way in the kitchen, peering with curiosity and pride over Blossom's pillows, and answering the constant summons to the store. Was there always this strange, loud restlessness about the woman, moving the very air perceptibly? Blossom felt her coming before she drew near; her heart beat quickly; involuntarily she closed her eyes, and feigned sleep. She was half afraid of this mother, with her sharp voice and abrupt ways, so unlike the gentle manners to which the girl had become accustomed. Had she really come home? Do

our friends come to us when they stand before our glad eyes, and lay their hands in ours? Are not the distant often nearer, the dead even, more truly present? Blossom's heart, with the first moment of consciousness, had travelled back over the trail to the wagon-train. The brown, rolling land was around her again. Again she heard the creak of the slow-moving wheels. Screened by the darkness, she had mounted Black Jess, and rode by her father's side. Then her dream vanished as she opened her eyes, and saw her mother standing by the bed with a tray in her hand. The woman had come in with careful step, almost afraid that a breath might blow away the pretty creature lying on the pillows, and whom she could hardly yet realize to be her own.

"You must try to eat a bit," she said, setting down her tray. "It's wearing toward night, and not a mouthful have you taken to-day."

"Night?" repeated Blossom, sitting up in a little flurry of excitement. "I ought not to have slept so long. They'll be coming in, and I promised" —

"There's time enough," said the woman; but her hand shook nervously as she set out the tray, and gave the little bowl of steaming broth to Blossom. "It's a long hour to dark yet, and they won't come before that."

She moved about restlessly while Blossom sipped her broth. More than once she pulled the curtain, and looked out upon the waning day. A fierce wind swept by: the great snow-clouds that had been rolling up for hours, now spread out a solid phalanx.

"There's snow in the air," she said with a shiver: "I've felt it all day. There'll be a storm to-morrow."

"But they'll be in before that."

Content, and a hope that was like assurance, had come to Blossom with the spoonfuls of warm broth she was sipping.

"Yes, long before that," the mother repeated hastily. She left the window, and from the foot of the bed watched the girl as she ate, but with an ear for every sound outside. They ought to come in now, this moment: they should have been in an hour ago, if no harm had befallen them. If she could but see and know the worst! If she could have borne the brunt of it instead of Stubbs! who was not indeed, as she had told Captain Elyot, the man he had been once. Ah! to wait and listen was like being bound with chains. The wind seemed to bring strange, frightened voices: the air was full of cries as she moved to the window again. The dog in his kennel just outside howled a warning for somebody. Blossom, unconscious of her mother's anxiety, had begun to lose something of her timidity. She prattled like a child,—now of her father, of the train, of her joy at coming home.

"I should have been quite happy," she ran on, "if aunt Julia had not been so sad over my coming away."

"She's no aunt of yours," Mrs. Stubbs said sharply, suddenly recalled from her own thoughts. "And she's forgot it, most likely, by this time."

"I think she can't have quite forgotten it so soon." Tears had come into Blossom's eyes at this rough-shod comfort. "And she was very kind, and wished me to call her aunt. Nobody could have been so kind," the girl went on—"unless," she added, suddenly mindful to whom she was speaking, "it were you or dear father." Her tears were falling now.

"Don't cry, child," Mrs. Stubbs said impatiently.

"She set a store by you, I don't doubt; but that's past and gone."

"She has hardly any one in the world but me," Blossom persisted, little dreaming of the jealous pain she aroused in her mother's heart.

No one but her! And did this woman who had cared for Blossom so many years really lay claim to the child? She had been hired to shelter and teach her. The term of service was over. There was an end of it.

"But I shall see her again. She will come to us, or we shall go there;" and Blossom wiped away her tears.

"You're low from the fright and all," Mrs. Stubbs said evasively. Come to them? or they go to her? Never! the woman said in her heart, losing sight of every thing, for the moment, but that this woman had won the child's love to herself. But Blossom would forget. Her own life had been too full from day to day to hold repinings: so it must be with the child. And she held in the bitter words on her lips. "You'll be better in the morning. The scare was too much for you. Lord! when I was your age I'd have thought nothing of a gallop of twenty miles, or a brush with the red-skins either. But girls ain't now what they used to be. Why, I've heard Miss Claudia here screech out at a striped snake I could 'a' killed with the heel of my shoe."

"Miss Claudia!" Blossom caught at the name.

"Yes, the major's daughter. You must have seen her. She was out with the rest of 'em when you came in this morning. But I forgot: you didn't know any thing about it. She's a friend of the cap'n's, — Cap'n Elyot." Blossom's face warmed into interest at this

name. The mother marked it. "They did say he was paying attention to her before he got leave, and left for the States; but I never believed it. He can see as far as the best of 'em; and she's false, Miss Claudia is." Mrs. Stubbs made this damaging statement against the major's daughter as calmly as though it had been the mildest innuendo. "But I reckon you saw a good deal of the captain on the way out," she added slyly, watching the girl, whose face was turned toward her.

"Yes," Blossom said slowly, unconscious of this espionage: "I saw him often riding with the others. I came to know his face quite well."

"He's a pleasant-spoken young man. Many's the evening he's spent here, smoking a pipe with your father, or taking a hand at cards with the rest of 'em."

"I never heard him speak," Blossom said thoughtfully, "or only once. It was the night before we left the train,—last night. How long ago it seems! I climbed down from the wagon (it was dark, you know) for a breath of air, and—and I met him face to face."

"He had a pleasant word for you, I'll warrant."

Blossom did not say that she had given him no opportunity to offer such a word. "He apologized, and went away," she said; but she blushed a little, remembering how she had begged him to go. She must have appeared very silly in his eyes.

"But there was the long ride to the fort," persisted the mother, anxious to know how far this most fortunate acquaintance had progressed. "It don't stand to reason that he never spoke to you once on the way."

"I hardly know, I cannot remember; but I was so frightened at last!" Blossom lost sight of every thing

else in the recollection of it. "We rode close to their camp, so close, that we thought we had roused them. I shall never forget it!" And the girl began to tremble, covering her face.

"There, don't think about it," said the mother, who hardly knew how to deal with fancies and fears so unlike her own. "It'll pass out of your mind when you've slept on it. Yes, he's a real gentleman, Cap'n Elyot is," she went on, going back to the first subject. "Stubbs'll give him something handsome when he comes in, though ten chances to one he won't take it; he's that proud, Cap'n Elyot is. But we'll ask him to supper. Your father'll know I'm getting ready for 'em, and'll bring him here, I don't doubt."

"And you think there is no danger?" Blossom inquired in a trembling voice. The ride of the night before had come back to her so vividly as to arouse her fears again.

"How can that be, with the troops to back 'em? Why, the Injuns'll fly like smoke before the wind." Blossom was assured by the bold words; the more, perhaps, because she remembered who rode at the head of the company from the fort. "You just make yourself fine, child, and don't worry about your father. Put on your prettiest ribbons; for I'm greatly mistaken if we don't have a handsome young man to supper to-night."

"But they're bringing my ribbons in with them," laughed Blossom. "I shall have no time to put them on. And, O mother! I have no clothes but these." And the girl looked ruefully at the odd dress which she had worn into the fort.

"Never you mind, child. You've that in your face that's better than fine clothes," the mother said proudly. "An' Cap'n Elyot has seen 'em a'ready: so it won't sig-

nify. You don't happen to know if there's any one else your father'd be likely to bring home with him?"

"There was a captain — I have forgotten his name. He had charge of the train."

"Luttrell, perhaps. He's expected about this time."

"Yes; and there was the wagon-master," Blossom said hesitatingly: "he seemed to be a friend to father."

"Cogger? They've been back and forth together a good many years now," the woman said indifferently. "But he won't come, nor Cap'n Luttrell, if I have my way. Thank God, we've done keeping open house, and being at the beck and call of anybody who'd a mind to come. I made 'em a grand supper before your father set out, and told 'em 'twas the last they need look for here. We'll keep to ourselves, now that you've come home. 'Twouldn't be seemly to be having everybody hanging about the house. We'll pick and choose among 'em. And Stubbs may open the store to the rest, if they must have their pipe and their game, and something to wash down their losses; for they do play high sometimes, though it's not for me to say so. Not that it's worse than at any of the other posts," she added with quick caution. "And what can you expect of men who've nothing else to do the most of the time? Whatever'll become of 'em when they've killed off all the Injuns the Lord knows!" The woman had worked herself into a cheerful humor over the derelictions of those about her. "I'll just take one more look into the kitchen," she said, "and then go and dress myself; for it's wearing toward night." The clouds seemed to drop lower and lower until they shut out every gleam of light. "Yes, it's wearing fast toward night;" and she sighed as she hastened away. Her cheerfulness had been only on the surface, after all.

She was detained as she passed through the store. Perhaps the odors from the feast in preparation—savory, and growing stronger—had stolen through the fort; for more than one idler dropped in to pay a tribute to Stubbs's popularity, and express a hope that all would go well with the train. They might, perhaps, look in later in the evening, when he had really arrived, which must be soon now: it would be too dark to follow the trail in an hour. But Mrs. Stubbs was deaf to all such suggestions. She had not prepared her banquet, roasting and broiling over the fire, to serve those who had staid at home. It would be time enough to gather whoever chose to come when her expected guests failed her. So she made but brief answer to all the congratulations over her daughter's return. Yes, she was quite recovered, since they were so polite as to ask. But, though more than one of the young officers had brushed up his uniform, it was all in vain. No invitation to walk into the parlor they all knew so well followed this cool reply. They began to realize at last that the door of that mild paradise was, indeed, closed upon them.

Then Mrs. Stubbs hastened away to dress. She laid by the common dark print worn ordinarily, and brought out a high-colored silk of old-fashioned make, which had been folded away for years. Some young ambition, outgrown later, some womanly desire to be dressed like the best of those about her, had given it a place among her stores. It was creased in odd squares from lying folded away, and rattled like paper when she shook it out; but she arrayed herself in it with trembling hands. A thoughtless word, never intended to give pain, which Blossom had dropped carelessly about

aunt Julia's tasteful dress, had brought this from its hiding-place. The girl should see that her mother, too, could be fine if she chose. The bright colors heightened her dark beauty. She stood before the glass, and smoothed her sleek hair, and pinned a handkerchief across her bosom, a deeper red than usual flushing her brown cheeks at this late consciousness of her good looks. It was years since such a thought had crossed her mind. She was shy of showing herself to Blossom when all was done. What if the girl should laugh at her for her pains? She hesitated at the door of the parlor. There was a flash of warm color in the room as the fire flamed up. Odd, incongruous pieces of furniture were ranged stiffly against the walls. The pipes, and the well-stained, rickety card-tables, which had been the chief ornaments of the apartment, were gone. The sanded floor was covered now with a gay carpet. The roses upon it bloomed into sudden summer as the firelight touched them. It had all been made gay and ugly in anticipation of Blossom's coming. Comfort had been scared away; and stiff, conventional propriety sat bolt upright in the heavy arm-chairs, or propped itself primly upon the high-backed sofa. The girl for whom all this sacrifice had been made, if sacrifice it was, had curled herself upon the hearth-rug within the circle of flickering light, her loose, pretty hair making a kind of dusky nimbus about her head. The quiet of the room, broken only by the shrieking wind outside, oppressed her. The forebodings which waiting and listening bring to the stoutest heart began to weigh upon her. There came a cheerful rustle at the door, as Mrs. Stubbs in her paper gown stepped into the room. The yellow, dancing light struck the bright

colors, and stretched up to the handsome, crimsoning face under the smooth dark hair. Blossom started as though she had seen a vision.

"How beautiful you are!" she exclaimed, her eyes opening wide, her hands unclasping.

"As fine as your friends t' the States?" And Mrs. Stubbs laughed a shy, awkward laugh as she busied herself over the fire.

"Oh, much finer!" Blossom said gravely. "It was only because she was so good to me, and dear, that aunt Julia was beautiful to look at."

She brought out from its corner one of the heavy old arm-chairs. It squeaked and groaned as she set it before the blaze. It burst out into hideous, sprawling flowers as the light touched it,—blue and yellow and purple, which the paper gown crushed and covered ruthlessly as Mrs. Stubbs took her place in it. There were companionship and cheer in the fire, though they sat voiceless before it. The wind swept around the house, and wailed in the chimney as they waited in silence. All at once there was a tramp of feet outside. Blossom caught her mother's arm, and listened,—her heart still, her lips apart, while the red glow died on the woman's face. A moment, and it passed by. It was only the relieving guard. Suddenly, in a lull of the wind, an icy tap struck the window-pane. Mrs. Stubbs started from her seat, and hurried to the window. Not a dozen rods away lay the broad, frozen river, and beyond, the endless stretch of sandy plain. But her eyes, blinded by the fire, saw only the thick darkness shutting them in.

"I must go out," she said half wildly. "I'll be back soon." For her own fears were thrown upon Blos-

som's face. "Don't be frightened. It's nothing at all. Only I've an errand down to the major's. I forgot it before."

"But can't Tolee go? The storm has begun."

"No, no! I'll go myself," the woman said, putting Blossom by, and beginning to wrap a shawl about her head.

"Take me with you, then." It was dreadful to be left alone. What was it her mother feared? Could something have befallen the train? But her father had said that they might not get in till hours later than this, — till morning even. "Do let me go." But her mother would not listen. "I'll be back soon," she said; "keep the fire bright against they come; and, if you mind staying alone, you can go to the kitchen." Then she closed the door after her, and went out into the night. Yes, the snow was falling. It was that which had struck against the window. The wind still raged. It beat on her head, and pulled at her shawl, and threw a mocking laugh after her as she struggled on. Already she had forgotten Blossom. She and Stubbs were alone again, in her excited imagination, as they had been before Blossom came to them. Ah, many a dark night, with the wind and the wolves howling about her, had she waited for him! The snow must have been falling softly for some time. It covered her feet as she pushed through the light drifts. She had known a storm like this to sweep down, and bury horses and men from sight. The river would be hidden in an hour. The trail would be lost. A lantern went hurrying by in the darkness. There was the tread of feet, the trample of hoofs, muffled by the snow. Others watched as well as she. She hastened on, — where, or to what end, she

hardly knew herself: the snow and sleet struck her face like a stinging hand. There were lights in the windows she passed. From one came a ringing laugh. Let them laugh! Housed safe and warm, they had no thought of those who might be lying stiff and stark under the snow, or pressing on to their death. There was a faint, answering wail from a distance, as the wind shrieked, and was still for a moment. Was it the wind, or the call of belated men borne in upon her bewildered ears? Again it came. It was caught up and echoed with a great shout below her. The shawl blew back from her head, as, her arms thrown free, she struggled toward the gate. There were voices and cries, and lanterns swinging high in air. A dozen mounted figures dashed away with a cheer. Thank God! The wagons were coming in at last!

Blossom went back to the fire, where her mother had left her. It was better to be alone than with stupid Tolee in the kitchen. She sat down to wait as patiently as she could. She had no presentiment of harm that could have befallen her father when she had put away the nervous terrors that fluttered about her, and gave herself really to consider the subject. Had he not assured her that there was nothing to fear? She remembered now that she was hungry. It might be late before their grand supper was served, if, indeed, it was not spoiled in waiting; for already a faint, alarming scent of burning stole in from the kitchen. She begged a cake of Tolee, who, stupid or ungracious, would have put her off; then she came back to her post to eat it, and listen and wait. The dancing firelight made her yawn. In spite of herself she grew drowsy, and dozed. It might have been a few moments, it might have been

hours, when the wind blew down the chimney with a screech, flapping a sudden gust in her face, putting out the candle she had lighted, and sending the ashes scurrying over the hearth. She sprang up, frightened and wide awake. Her mother had not returned. She was still alone. Was she dreaming yet? Or were strange, confused sounds tossed back and forth outside, — a new awakening at the post, like that upon which she had closed her eyes early in the morning? She lit the candle; but before her eager hands could set it in its place, or the shadow had been driven to the corners of the room, these sounds drew near. She flew to throw the door wide open at the tread of feet outside. He must have come! Had she not said that she would be the first to greet him? All the confused, far-off voices flew into the room as the wet wind struck her face. The long red rays from a lantern swung zigzag on the snow. Voices were calling, shouts replying; a rider galloped by; lights were dancing in the distance. But what was this the men were bearing past her into the house, — this dragging, heavy burden wrapped from sight? And why did her mother follow, weeping, and wringing her hands?

The blanket dropped from the dead face; and Blossom fell like a snowflake where she had stood aside to let them pass. For it was Stubbs — dead, shot through the heart.

And this was Blossom's coming home.

CHAPTER VII.

THE HOUSE WITH DEATH IN IT.

THE train had been attacked at daybreak ; but the little company defended itself bravely until reinforcements from the fort surprised and scattered the enemy. Only two men were killed, of whom the post-sutler was the first to fall. Five or six more were wounded, but not dangerously ; and the wagons, for which all this jeopardy and loss of life had been incurred, were safely conveyed to the fort at last. It was the bustle and din of the camp forming just outside the stockade, which had rushed in upon Blossom when she opened the door to meet her father.

No one noticed the girl. The men returned, and passed out by the way they had come, leaving the wife alone with her dead. But hardly had the door closed after them, when it was cautiously opened once more, and Cogger, who had been one of the bearers of poor Stubbs's body, appeared again, thrusting his head in warily, and finally stepping carefully into the room.

"Wherever's the little gal?" he muttered to himself. Some late remembrance of Blossom standing in the open door, with her happy, welcoming face, had crossed his mind, and made him return. What had become of

the child? Who would try to comfort her? And then the man, peering about in the dim light, discovered a little dark heap lying behind the door. "Poor creeter!" And he raised her in his arms, holding her fearfully and at arm's-length. "I declar' t' goodness, I don' know what t' do for ye. Whar's yer mother? 'Pears t' me she'd better be tendin' t' the livin' than groanin' over the dead. Cryin' won't bring him t' life." And, still bearing Blossom in his arms, he crossed the room to the door, from behind which came at intervals the sound of low groans and the restless tread of feet. "*She* ain't in no state t' tend t' ye," he said, after listening a moment, addressing unconscious Blossom. "I reckon I'll hev t' try my hand."

He laid the girl down upon the floor, with her feet to the fire, and, going out, returned with a handful of snow, with which he sprinkled her face, and bathed her temples. Then he set himself to rubbing her hands with a corner of his rough coat, carefully choosing the cleanest; and at last, taking a flask from his pocket, wet her lips with its contents from time to time. His awkward yet gentle efforts were not in vain. The dark eyelashes laid upon the white cheeks trembled visibly; the breath of returning life warmed the death-like face. "She's comin' 'round," muttered the delighted wagon-master. He took off his drenched, shabby hat, and threw it upon the floor, and with both hands proceeded to smooth his rough hair down upon either side of his face. "I ain't much t' look at, an' I might skeer her ef she opened her eyes sudden," he apologized to himself for this unusual exercise of the toilet. Acting upon this thought, too, he tried to wrench his countenance into something like a smile, with which to greet her when she should

return to life. Fortunately the fire demanded his attention; and it was at this moment that Blossom, coming to herself, and unclosing her eyes, sat up to find a strange figure thrusting the poker sharply among the coals, and laying a forestick upon the andirons. She recognized his profile against the light, and her thoughts flew to the last time she had seen him; then they travelled home to the present, and she burst into tears.

"Now don't 'ee," said the man, at his wits'-end to know how to console her. "'Tain't no use, ye know: he's dead."

"I know it," sobbed Blossom. "O father, father!"

"He set a store by his little gal," Cogger ventured, when she had wept in silence a while. "You should 'a' heerd him the night ye rode off with the cap'n!"

"Did he speak of me? Oh! what did he say?" Blossom forgot her crying for a moment. To hear his words was like bringing her father to life again. "Was he glad that I had gone?"

"Uncommon," Cogger replied sententiously.

"Tell me all he said: don't leave any thing out."

"Wall, ef I ken. But ye see, I didn't lay it by, as 'twere, not thinkin' of sech an occasion. 'Twas arter ye'd gone, ye know, an' the boys were mostly sleepin', seein' 's we'd got t' catch up in an hour or two. But thar wa'n't no sleep fur him, he sed. Them was his own words, — 'Thar ain't no sleep-fur me.'"

"Did he say so? Poor father! Was he afraid some harm would come to me?"

"Jest that. 'I ain't slept day nor night,' sez he, 'for thinkin' o' the little gal. Ef I kin only git her safe to her mother, who's an uncommon woman!' An' so she is: she reminds me of a gal I knew once down Wash-

ita way, tho' that ain't neither here nor thar;" and Cogger fell into a reverie.

"And was that all? Did he say nothing more?"

"'Pears t' me thar was somethin' about what a comfort ye'd been t' him, and somethin' about how ye'd hung on to his heart, and how he'd wanted most powerful t' see ye. They was good words, I know, fur a man t' have in his mouth t'ward the last."

The fire blazed high, and set all the room aglow again; it touched Blossom's pale cheek laid against the purple and yellow arm-chair. Outside the storm still raged; but something like comfort stilled the girl's heart. He thought of her, — he remembered her to the last.

"But oh! there is something else I want to ask you," she said, trying to keep back her sobs. "Did you know, were you beside him when" — she shuddered, and hid her face.

"No: I can't say's I wos, an' be truthful. Ye see, I ain't no sperit whatever when there's Injuns 'round. I can't do nothin' but tear arter 'em, an' cut an' slash among 'em."

Blossom raised her head, and regarded him with wet, astonished eyes. "But I should think, if you are so afraid, you'd run away from them."

"One ud think so, sartain," Cogger replied thoughtfully; "but I don't. It's fear, I s'pose; an' that's all," he said, taking up his shabby hat, and moving toward the door. "Don't speak about it," when the girl would have thanked him. "Your father 'n' me was pardners for years. I'd do ye a sarvice with a cheerful sperit any time, if so be as ye needed one. Not thet I'm t' be in these parts long; but anybody along the trail knows Dan Cogger, an', if ye need a friend, ye won't look far

for one." Then, with a like message for her mother, he took his leave.

While this interview was taking place down at the sutler's quarters, a very different scene was presented at Major Bryce's, where Captain Elyot had dropped in for a word with Mrs. Bryce. Several ladies had assembled, in spite of the storm, to discuss the attack upon the wagon-train, and pick up any item of news it might have brought in. The major's daughter had been serving tea; and the little flurry of fright and excitement which had pervaded the small community had only stimulated every one to unusual spirits: so that it was a very cheerful and almost gay company in the midst of which Captain Elyot found himself.

"O Captain Elyot!" they exclaimed, surrounding him. "How glad we are to see you safely back again! And now we shall hear the truth of it. They say you were quite a hero."

"You are very kind," the young man replied gravely. "But poor Stubbs was the only hero, and he paid dear enough for his honors.—How do you do, Miss Claudia?" as the major's daughter set down the cup of tea in her hand, and turned to meet him.

His tone was warm enough for friendliness as Claudia gave him her hand; but there was in his manner neither the eagerness nor the confusion with which a lover is supposed to meet his mistress after a long absence. Miss Laud was watching him with her sharp eyes.

"He is very handsome, but not a bit in love," she said to herself.

As for Claudia, she greeted him with an embarrassment she could not control, blushing to her hair; for by this time she had assumed the puffs and curls and braids,

and made herself fine, with the hope that chance or inclination, or some good fate, would bring the young man here.

"You must be very tired. Will you let me give you some tea?"

She had marked his great cavalry boots, and the disorderly dress, which he had had no time to arrange; but did not this speak of his eagerness to come to her, as well as of dangers past, and glory indeed? for he had fought with the bravest, she knew. She was a soldier's daughter; and her heart beat with pride over this handsome, bold young man who was a hero in all eyes to-night. He might deny it; but he was a hero, nevertheless. She pulled up an arm-chair, for every one had risen at his entrance.

"Sit down and make yourself comfortable while I call Jinny to bring a fresh pot: it will take but a moment. I wish you had come an hour earlier: you would have been better served."

But Captain Elyot declined the chair turned so invitingly to the fire.

"I have had a cup of tea already," he said, "and thank you all the same. And I really cannot stay. I only called to pay my respects at headquarters," he added, with a gallant bow to the major's daughter, — too gallant, by far, Miss Laud thought, — "and to say a word to your mother."

Mrs. Bryce came bustling up at the moment to press Claudia's offer of hospitality. She was a stout, fussy woman, with a red face, all aglow now with good will.

"You are quite too good," he said gratefully, and a little ashamed of the honors thrust so openly upon him. "I really cannot stay: I thought perhaps you would go

down to the sutler's. Mrs. Stubbs must be in great trouble. I'm on my way there now."

And it was for this he had come! Claudia's heart turned to a stone.

"To be sure I will! I was telling the major a few moments ago that some one ought to go down there. Just wait till I can put on my cloak. Or don't let me keep you: it is really dreadful. Jinny will go with me; and I'll stop long enough to put up a few things that may be needed."

"And if you could do any thing for the daughter," said Captain Elyot, turning to Claudia. "The poor girl must be nearly distracted. If you could bring her here?" he suggested with well-meant stupidity.

He made the proposition boldly. His reception had been so kind, that he was afraid to ask nothing, especially as he remembered that he and Claudia had been the best of friends before he went East. Miss Laud, standing behind Miss Bryce, pulled at her gown. Now was the time to show herself unsuspicious, and to win his gratitude. Claudia could not be so blind, so foolishly perverse, as to refuse!

"I — don't — know," Claudia stammered, suddenly cold, and unmindful of this pantomime advice. "I am afraid we are full. But mamma will do what is necessary, I don't doubt."

Then she moved away and left him, somewhat bewildered, it must be owned, and not at all sure that she had accepted his suggestion. But Miss Laud followed him to the door.

"Claudia will go down in the morning, I am sure," she said. "You see how impossible it is for her to leave now. If *I* could do any thing — but of course a stran-

ger would only be in the way. It is very sad for them! Claudia and I were speaking of the daughter this morning. Such a sweet face as she has!"

And the young man went off, with his heart warm toward Miss Bryce and her friend, who would do all they could to heal the cruel hurt Blossom had received. How stupid he had been to misunderstand Claudia for a moment, and to leave without a word! He forgot that she had turned away from him.

The windows at the sutler's were dark, and beaten full of snow, when he reached the house. There was no response to his tap at the door; and he ventured to enter unannounced the room where he had spent so many evenings. It was unlighted, — the candle had burned out, and no one had thought to replace it, — and seemed empty of human presence; for in the darkness he did not notice the girl, who had cried herself to sleep upon the floor at last.

A bright line of light under the door at the foot of the room drew him on. It must be there they had laid Stubbs; and there he should find the widow and Blossom.

But again no one responded to his knock at the door; and, after a moment, he pushed it open, and stepped into the room. There was something awful in the stillness of the bare little bedroom in which Stubbs reposed. It was not death alone that struck a chill to his heart. He had become, in a measure, accustomed to that, — to death in its most dreadful forms, — in the vestments and attitudes of life, with open, staring eyes, out under the wide sky. It was the death-in-life of the woman's face beside the bed that filled him with awe, and froze the words upon his lips. What comfort could he bring to this

woman, with her dead lying stretched out before her? He stood a moment, with uncovered head, looking down upon the quiet face from which all earthly passion had faded. It seemed even to wear an expression of content, as though this long sleep were sweet and dreamless, and full of rest. So should he be some day; but he could not bring it home to his consciousness now. With the blood quick and warm in his veins, his thoughts flew rather to the living. Where was Stubbs's daughter? Where was Blossom? He had promised to stand by her at the worst, never dreaming that the worst would be like this. But he would not forget his vow. Here, by the dead body of her father who had committed her to his keeping, he renewed it. She should find a friend in him. Then he approached the woman who sat at the foot of the bed, her hands locked, her eyes staring straight before her. He spoke to her; but she did not move. He touched her arm; but she shook him off. "Where is the child? Where is Miss Blossom?" he asked, stooping down, and speaking in her ear. That would recall her. But she only turned her vacant, bloodshot eyes upon him without a word. She had forgotten the child.

But Blossom could not be far away. It was cruel to leave her alone. How little Claudia and her friend had realized her forlorn condition! If they had known it, they would have come to her at once, he deluded himself with thinking. He could do nothing for the sutler's wife; but it could not be long now before Mrs. Bryce came to her. One of her own sex would know, as he did not, how to touch the springs of her heart, and make an outlet for her sorrow.

He closed the door after him with that hush which

the presence of the dead imposes on us all, and returned to the parlor. The room had been familiar enough to him once; but the very outline of it seemed changed now, as his eyes became somewhat accustomed to the darkness. A little heap of darker shadows before the dying embers of the fire caught his eye. Could that be Blossom? He crossed the floor, uttering her name in a subdued voice.

There was a movement among the shadows on the hearth-rug, then a figure, slight, and with unbound hair, rose between him and the faint glow of the firelight. "Who is it?" asked Blossom in a heart-broken tone, which touched the young man more than the sight of the dead face he had just left.

"And you are all alone?" said he, without waiting to announce himself. "Let me get a light. There used to be matches here."

He had pushed the heavy chair away, and was searching upon the mantel while he spoke. It had been laden, when he knew it last, with pipes and matches, and boxes of tobacco. But all was indeed changed here.

"Wait: I will bring one," Blossom said, disappearing for a moment, to return with a little circle of flaring light about her head from the lamp in her hand, lighting up her pale face and heavy eyes as she set it down upon the table. Then she waited, with her hands crossed, and a strange calm upon her childish countenance, in an attitude of utter self-forgetfulness, for what he was about to say.

There came to him, like an echo, a recollection of the scene he had just left. And not one of those women had thought of this poor child! It was an injustice to

the ladies of the post, since more than one of them had spoken pityingly of both Blossom and her mother, though no one but the major's wife had proposed going to them. Mrs. Stubbs had inspired her acquaintances with an awe which amounted to terror among the female and more timid portion. They looked down upon her, to be sure, as belonging to another order than themselves; but they sympathized with her so far as it was possible. And yet might she not resent a sympathy which had had no forerunner of friendliness?

"And you are entirely alone? This ought not to be," said Captain Elyot, with a glance of surprise over the fine, dismal apartment which had put on such a strange face to him. "But Mrs. Bryce, the major's wife, will be down directly: she'll take you home with her, I hope."

"Oh, don't send me away!" Blossom's sobs broke out anew at this.

"Send you away? It's not for me to send you away, or do any thing else, as for that matter. Only nobody seems to think of you. They're coming down to see what can be done for your mother; and I hoped some of them would take you home."

"But I would rather stay — with him," said Blossom brokenly, and hardly above her breath.

"Then you shall," the young man replied, with a decision which set Blossom's timid heart at rest. "But I have something for you here."

He approached the table where she had set the light down, and which formed a barrier between them, behind which the child stood, with a pitiful attempt at quiet and self-control. Some locks of her soft

brown hair, loosely curling, fell over her face. She pushed them back, and took up the scrap of crumpled paper he laid before her, an occasional sobbing breath breaking the silence between them as she tried to make out the scrawling lines written upon it. It was the leaf from the memorandum-book which Stubbs had pinned upon the little gray gown in the wagon. Some curious eyes had found it out, and it had come to Captain Elyot's hand.

"I kommit my soul to God, and all I die possessed of to my wife and the child. May God have them in his keepin!" It read.

It was Stubbs's last will and testament.

Poor Blossom's tears burst out afresh at this. Tender as his heart was toward her in her trouble, the young man was sorely at a loss to comfort her; and yet he would not go away and leave her alone. Would none of the women ever come! "You see, he felt that he was going to die, and had you in his mind at the very last," he ventured, when she had cried a few moments, with hysterical sobs it frightened him to hear. And then he went on to speak of her father's death: it was instantaneous, painless. Gradually the sobs became less violent as she listened. Without being aware of it, he had said the very words Blossom most longed to hear.

There had been a horror in her mind, which had fairly overcome her grief, in regard to the manner of his death. She knew nothing of it; but vague recollections of stories heard and read in years past, of Indian tortures and massacres, had crowded together, and assumed dreadful shapes in her fancy. His words brought a relief that almost took away her pain.

He did not think it necessary to add that he had risked his own life to drag the lifeless body out of the reach of the savages. He had no thought of himself at the moment. It was enough to see that the child was stilled and comforted. "We were old friends, your father and I," he said at last, making a boast of a friendship he would hardly have given a thought to twenty-four hours before; and yet his heart was really warm at the remembrance of the little sutler's many virtues. "I hope you won't forget it, or that your father trusted you to me. I'll be a kind of brother to you, if you'll let me," he added with sudden shyness. And Blossom put out one of her little hands, and raised her face, all wet with tears, to smile a feeble smile more sad than crying, at this promise.

Then Mrs. Bryce's loud rap sounded at the door; and she came bustling in, full of, it must be owned, rather condescending kindness. She would have lowered her voice, and chosen her words more carefully, in another house; for there are different qualities of sympathy, and we mete them out according to the case in hand. And close behind Mrs. Bryce followed the chaplain and his wife. Something of the sorrowfulness of grief seemed to fly away from the house as the door opened for all these officious, well-meaning people to enter in; and death was no longer awful and still, but a confusion of strange running to and fro, of whisperings and beckonings, and mysterious figures passing in and out, with faces which strove to be sad, but were only strange and bewildering. By and by the echo of a prayer came out from the room where the dead man lay.

Captain Elyot stole away from it all, haunted by Blossom's pale, frightened face, and the hoarse sobs coming from the bedside of the dead man, like a dreadful response to the prayers the chaplain was reading out of his book.

CHAPTER VIII.

A NEW LIFE.

THE funeral was over, and Stubbs was laid away to his long sleep, and still the earth rolled on. The snows swept in upon Fort Atchison as the winter drew near; the river, shut into its shallow bed, was covered from sight; and only the cold sky overhead and the broken snow-white land, desolate as a sun-scorchèd desert, met the eyes of the little company locked in at the post.

Long before this, the train, of which the sutler's wagons had formed a part, had reached its destination. Blossom, with tears in her eyes, and a strange sense of loneliness in her heart, had watched them until the white top of the last disappeared in the distance as they moved off upon the southern trail. Before setting out, Cogger had repeated his offer of friendly aid to Mrs. Stubbs. "I ain't o' much 'count, bein' but a fearsome sort o' a person at best," he had said; "but I'd be glad t' do ye a sarvice, seein's Stubbs an' me were as good as pardners for years. Any thing short o' fi'tin' the Injuns," he added, as though afraid of having promised too much.

But Mrs. Stubbs received this bashful proffer of ser-

vice with an indifference almost contemptuous. It was not to such friends as this she should look now. The first shock of stunning grief had passed away; but it had hardened her heart. Her ambition had been checked for a time by the lethargy which held her, to be turned now into new and wider channels, and to flow the swifter for the accumulated force gathered in the mean time.

All was changed at the sutler's quarters; but this change had been planned before Stubbs's untimely death. There were no more merry stories or hilarious songs over steaming glasses; neither chink of gold, nor rustle of cards, nor, indeed, any other sound of revelry, floated out from the sutler's parlor now. A decent respect for Stubbs's memory might have modified this gayety for a while; but it was understood at the post that there was to be no return to these festivities. Stubbs's daughter had come home at last; and the family was to retire within itself, and be clothed upon with the decent reserve enveloping the half a dozen other families of the garrison. Although honestly lamented by his friends and patrons, Stubbs would hardly have been mourned as he was, but for the fact that his death deprived the post of a social centre. His virtues became, for the moment, the universal topic of conversation, at least among the male residents at the fort. His obliging manners; a friendly familiarity tempered with deference; his stories, in which he never played the hero; above all, his punch, which might have vied with Samson for strength, — were extolled to a degree that would have made proud the heart of the sutler, could he have known it. Alas! appreciation and honor are plants which grow mostly in graveyards. But, while

every thing else withered and died, Stubbs's memory was kept green throughout all the long, cold winter.

In one respect there was no perceptible change. Mrs. Stubbs, who had been for years the active partner in affairs pertaining to the store, conducted the business still. This was the more necessary, since months must elapse before any one could be appointed to fill the place nominally vacant. It was well, too, for the woman, that some sharp necessity urged her on at this time, when despair, and a sense of loss she could hardly comprehend, pulled her down constantly. But, as the days went on, she turned more and more from the past. The present was full for her, — full of cares and vexations which sharpened the temper, never of the mildest, and irritated the nerves, strained almost to breaking by the shock she had endured. The future alone was pleasant to contemplate. All the wild schemes that had been only fascinating dreams over Blossom's rude cradle came back to her now. What should prevent their becoming realities? She courted them; she dwelt among them in her occasional moments of leisure; they crept in upon her work, bewildering her brain, and confusing her hands. How to work them out into practical life was the problem that puzzled her. But this she would learn, or it would come to her later. There was nothing to which she might not attain, now that there was no one to put a check upon her desires.

But it was not for herself that she had encouraged these new-formed schemes. The child had come to mingle in all her thoughts. She was the object and end of all her ambitious hopes. To speak gentle words, or to caress her, to sympathize in any degree with her

tastes, to enter even the gates of her innocent fancies, she could not. But to work for Blossom with her hard hands, to scheme subtly, and even fight for her if need be, — all this she could and would do.

Sometimes the apathy of grief or added years tempted her to seek ease and quiet instead. The old, strong life that had tingled in her veins to her finger-ends, making her restless, active, aggressive, seemed to have ebbed away, leaving her stranded high and dry, moved only by an occasional tide. The muscles of her strong arms lost their solidity; the fresh color died in her cheeks; the keen fire died in her eyes; and white threads began to mark the shining black hair. A strange indifference to every thing lay in wait for her continually, against which she battled feebly. She had been knocked down, battered, bruised, left like one dead; but her strength was coming back, though she was still blinded and dizzy. In a little time she could renew the struggle, if her courage would but hold out. There was one circumstance which stung her to something of her old keenness; and that was the indifference with which Blossom's appearance had been received at the post by the ladies sojourning there. With one exception, no one of them had called upon her, or extended to her the slightest civility. Claudia Bryce had not been persuaded, though Miss Laud had done her best, to follow her mother to the sutler's, either on the night he was brought home dead, or on any of the succeeding days. Blossom need not have protested against being sent away: she was not asked to exchange the gloom of her own home for the more cheerful atmosphere at the major's. Mrs. Bryce knew nothing of this suggestion; and Claudia had not repeated it.

One exception there was to the general indifference. Mrs. Brown, the chaplain's wife, did indeed call upon the stranger. Mrs. Stubbs, entering hastily from the store one afternoon, unwarned of this visit, found her occupying one of the purple and yellow arm-chairs. The sutler's widow felt that it was but a professional call, and in her heart resented it, sitting upon the edge of one of her own fine chairs in stiff, unbending dignity, and taking no part in the conversation. Blossom, meanwhile, by no means self-conscious enough to attribute the visit to any motive but kindness, too simple-hearted to give it a thought, indeed, chattered unreservedly of her Eastern home, her friends, and her school-life; for to that pleasant past Mrs. Brown had considerably directed the polite interrogations which supported the rather frail discourse between them. Shadows and sunlight crossed the girl's face as one memory after another was awakened, and the long, slanting sunbeams from the little windows passed by the ugly gay chairs, and gaudy flowering carpet, to touch the graceful figure in the simple dark-blue gown, and to crown, for the moment, with almost perfect beauty, the bright, warm face.

Mrs. Brown, who had come at the suggestion of her husband; — Mrs. Stubbs was not so far out of the way, after all, — was quite won by the girl's pretty, childish face, and modest, graceful ways. "Who would have believed it!" she said to herself, with an unconscious glance toward the mother, stiff, ill at ease, and almost forbidding in aspect. "How lonely the poor little thing must be!" And she urged Blossom to come and see her very soon. "Come for the afternoon," she said. "I am often alone while Mr. Brown is in his

school, and find the time hanging heavy on my hands. We have a few books, if you are fond of reading, and some of the late magazines, though I fear they would be old to you. But you will soon, like the rest of us, drop six months behind the times, and be quite contented that it should be so too; which is the oddest part of it," she added, with a cheerful laugh. "I suppose we lose our ambition; but I am by no means sure that ambition is a desirable quality to possess," she said, with another laugh. "But you are to come and see me, mind, and very soon."

Blossom was charmed with their visitor, and delighted with her offer of friendship. She looked toward her mother, before giving the shy assent upon her lips.

"You can go if you want to," Mrs. Stubbs said ungraciously, making Blossom's cheeks tingle with shame. Then the woman did remember her manners sufficiently to thank the chaplain's wife. But the thanks lacked spontaneity; and Mrs. Brown went away chilled and mildly ruffled. After all, it was impossible to make any thing of these people.

But Blossom knew nothing of the check which her good will had received, and set out, after what she deemed a suitable time had elapsed, to return the visit of the chaplain's wife. She hung a little reticule upon her arm, in which was hidden away some bit of work, since she had been asked to pass the afternoon. But, though Mrs. Brown was scrupulously polite and interested in her visitor, something was gone from her graciousness. It seemed, indeed, to be held under lock and key, and to be doled out on demand. There were none of the silly but delightful little outbursts of speech, which had so charmed Blossom at their first

interview. The truth was, that Mrs. Brown had not forgotten how stiffly Mrs. Stubbs had received her. Looking upon Blossom with sharp, critical eyes to-day, she fancied the daughter had something of the mother's frigidity. Poor Blossom was growing more and more embarrassed every moment at this reception, so unlike what she had looked forward to. She could hardly keep back the tears; and, oh! how could she hide the reticule upon her arm? Mrs. Brown did notice it at last, but only when the girl had gained courage, by a desperate effort, to get up from her chair, and make a move to go home.

"I would ask you to take off your hat; but I—I am going down to Mrs. Bryce's to meet some friends," stammered the chaplain's wife.

"I could not stay; indeed I could not," said Blossom, trying to hide the dreadful reticule in the folds of her gown, and ready to cry with disappointment, but, above all, with shame. And she fairly ran away, without another word of adieu.

An uncomfortable consciousness that she had not dealt quite fairly with the girl did pursue Mrs. Brown as she tied her rigolette about her head, donned her shawl, and prepared herself for a call at the major's in corroboration of her excuse to Blossom. She was going to the major's, and she should, without doubt, meet friends there: so she flattered herself that she had not told an untruth. And, after all, if she had taken up this girl, petted her and made of her, as she had been tempted to do at first, she would only have made her discontented in the sphere to which she was born, and prepared her for unnumbered slights and stings, since it was not to be supposed that all the ladies at the post

would have been equally gracious to the sutler's daughter. It was tolerable philosophy, and it eased the conscience of the good woman ; but, unfortunately, it could not reach Blossom, who hurried home to pour out her tears before her mother, ashamed of a disappointment so childish, and wounded, she hardly knew how. And the mother comforted her, roughly to be sure ; but sympathy is from heart to heart, and the words that carry it are nothing. She kept down the bitter, angry words that rose to her lips ; she concealed the rage that made her angry and revengeful toward the woman who had slighted her child. For she understood it all. No suddenly remembered engagement had taken her away : Blossom had been unwelcome.

"Send your daughter down to the house," said Mrs. Bryce one morning not long after this unfortunate visit. The major's wife was lingering at the counter in the store, over a web of muslin, testing its quality between thumb and forefinger. "It must be dull for her here," she went on. "I'll take her with me now, since I'm quite alone to-day. Does she understand plain sewing?" And Mrs. Bryce smoothed the web of cloth with her stout white hand, which shone with handsome, old-fashioned rings, while waiting for the reply, which was long in coming.

"My daughter is busy with her own affairs, and thank you, ma'am." Angry as she was, the sutler's wife could not forget the respect due to the wife of the commanding officer. "She understands fine sewing as well as plain, thanks to the ladies as taught her to hold her needle when she was only a little thing. But there's no need of her using it for other folks, nor for herself as for that matter, unless she chooses." And Mrs.

Stubbs actually turned her back upon the major's wife.

"Hoity-toity!" said Mrs. Bryce, retreating hastily, after a stare of astonishment over this awful procedure. "To hear the woman! It's time the major took it in hand, if one can't buy a yard of muslin without being insulted."

She reached home with her wrath full grown, and her mild, round face in a blaze.

"Such airs!" she exclaimed, recounting the story at dinner. "And over that chit of a girl! You should have heard her, Major Bryce, assure me to my face that her daughter need not so much as take a needle into her hand, unless she chose. And then she actually stalked off about her own affairs, without so much as asking if I had been served. It's quite time there was a change. One would think the woman was conferring a favor every time she gives you a spool of thread."

"Ha, ha," laughed the major boisterously. "So you attacked Mrs. Stubbs! You're braver than I thought you, my dear. Interfere? Not I! You women may fight it out. But she'll give you no quarter, I can tell you. And it's the daughter, is it? Well, she's a pretty little thing, pretty enough to set you all by the ears."

"Pretty!" Claudia repeated disdainfully. "She's a sly minx, peeping out from behind the window, with her pink-and-white face, at every young man that goes by!"

"Oh-ho!" shouted the major. "Sits the wind in that quarter? You girls had better look out for your laurels. I saw Captain Elyot casting his eyes toward that same window not half an hour ago." And, having fired his heaviest gun, like a wise man he took himself out of danger of its recoil.

But the wrath of the major's wife was lukewarm to that aroused in Mrs. Stubbs's bosom. Do plain sewing, indeed! Ah, but the time should come (and the woman nailed her vow with an oath) when Blossom should take her place with the best of them. There was money enough: with this, and Blossom's pretty face, what might not be done!

For the girl was sweet to look at, with a beauty of delicate outline, and soft, changing color, and with an expression in her innocent brown eyes as though they had but just opened wonderingly upon the world. It was hardly the highest type of beauty, and one which the touch of illness or long-settled sorrow might sweep away entirely, but very sweet and winsome, nevertheless, and not to be lightly valued. It won for her more friends than she knew; though these, to be sure, were rather of the opposite sex than her own. Major Bryce, who remembered her as a baby, had always a rough, good-natured word for the girl; and the other officers at the post, especially the younger ones, hung about the store upon the flimsiest pretexts, with the hope of catching a passing glimpse of her pretty face, if nothing more. But in all these schemes they were foiled. No fashionable mother, with an eye to the proprieties and a fine settlement, could have watched over a daughter with greater vigilance than did this woman to whom instinct and inborn craft were the only guides.

The young men might squander their pay, and dawdle away their time, at the store, if they chose; but no moated castle was ever more impregnable than that little parlor, with its gaudy furbishing, the door of which was in plain sight, and behind which Blossom was safely ensconced, all unconscious of her state of siege.

"You've turned the cold shoulder on us of late," said the red-faced cavalry-captain, Luttrell, in an insinuating tone, after he had hung about the store for a long half-hour one day.

"It isn't for a decent woman, and a widow like me, to be opening her house to everybody," Mrs. Stubbs rejoined in a coldly virtuous tone.

"But you might give a place to an old friend," said the captain, with a tender leer from his watery eyes. The bold scheme of making love to the old woman did cross his mind, and, by this means, to gain a footing in that paradise, concerning which the wildest rumors floated about the post.

"An old friend!" repeated Mrs. Stubbs contemptuously. "And will you be pleased to tell me, Captain Luttrell, if it is six months, or three, since we first saw you out here? And, if it's my society they want, my old friends, as you call 'em, have enough of that, and welcome, here in the store. There's no need to open the door of the house."

"So you only opened it to us before for the sake of what you could make out of us?" said the captain, insolent in defeat.

"I sha'n't deny it if you choose to say so," Mrs. Stubbs replied coldly. "Perhaps you came to us as much for the eatin' an' drinkin', an' a fire to light yer pipes by, as for the company of such as we. It wasn't for me to be speakin' of you as friends." A touch of the old proud humility came to the woman for a moment. "I served them as came, as he bade me, and asked no questions. I served 'em well, and they paid their reckonin',—at least, the most of 'em paid for what they had," at which Captain Luttrell looked uncom-

fortable. "There's no occasion for it now, that's all." And the woman folded her arms, and regarded the discomfited captain from over the counter with a defiance which held not a quaver of fear of him or his words.

"By ——!" said the captain, in repeating the story (with some omissions), "she routed every man of us. I was glad to get off with my scalp."

CHAPTER IX.

BLOSSOM'S VISITOR.

BUT if Mrs. Stubbs ruled at the store with an iron sceptre, and stood, in spirit, like a mounted guard bristling with spears before the door of the house, she laid by her symbol of power, and threw away her weapons of warfare, when once in the little parlor. This was Blossom's province. If Mrs. Stubbs was born to resist and do battle, just so surely was Blossom created for all beautiful and delicate things. Though reared in the doctrine of Arminius, one can hardly hold to his faith, when we see how truly we are all fore-ordained and predestinated to certain paths in life, rooted into earth from which we cannot tear ourselves, bent and twisted, and turned into ways where we never desired to go, bound upon Ixion wheels by chains we cannot break. All the roughness and hardness of their life the mother took upon herself, — or it was hers by right of birth. For Blossom was the easy way, the sunshine, the flowers, or whatever semblance of them came to this dreary, bleak spot at this untoward season. It is true they were but paper flowers at the best, and gave out very little fragrance; but, such as they were, the girl took them, and was content. Her sorrow had by this time

ceased to press heavily upon her. There had been no constant companionship with her father, — except for those few weeks never to be forgotten, — the privation of which she was to feel now: it was over what they were to have been to each other that she had grieved most of all. It was a disappointment, even more than a loss, which had come to her; and disappointments, though they weigh heavily, weigh not for a long time upon young hearts. She had become accustomed to her new home, and learned to adapt herself, after a gentle fashion, to its ways. Gradually the ugly, low parlor, took on a quaint grace from her presence. The painful right angles at which the stiff, uncouth furniture had been disposed, were broken up; and even the most obdurate of tables and sofas found their place at last. A little chintz and muslin, and skilful handiwork, toned down the gay colors; and here, in a bower of her own devising, Blossom spent much of her time. Quiet and sometimes rather lonely hours they were, in which she wrote long letters to the good woman who had been a mother to her, and to the school-friends who even so soon began to have interests which she could not share. The mails were necessarily irregular, and perhaps this would explain why so few replies were ever received to her missives; though, doubtless, Mrs. Stubbs could have told the fate of more than one of them. There was a piano here, the only one at the post, which had come all the way across the plains in the train with Blossom. For Stubbs would have brought out a chime of brazen bells, if it could have added to her happiness.

“It is like magic! Why, Miss Blossom, you are a witch,” Captain Elyot said the first time he was admitted after this transformation. He had known the place in

its shabby old days, and had seen it in its hideous new guise, and could hardly believe it to be the same. Blossom blushed, and dropped her eyes, and laughed shyly, feeling quite repaid for her pains by this brusque, outspoken praise. Captain Elyot found his way here often of evenings now. You may be sure that he met with no such reception as had been given to Captain Luttrell when he asked permission to call. No, indeed! If he had been the fairy prince himself, the doors could not have opened wider or more willingly at his approach. Mrs. Stubbs welcomed him with her best smile and gown, though the latter was the fresher of the two, it must be owned. Smiles were not in her way now, poor woman! And such dainty dishes as she set before him when he joined them at supper! as he did sometimes, by special invitation, to the envy of the other officers at the post, who had not forgotten Mrs. Stubbs's culinary skill. And, as though this were not enough, the finest tobacco in the store was brought in for his approval.

"Just one pipe," urged his hostess; "bless you, Blossom and me don't mind. It ain't quite what the last was, though I don't hear 'em complain."

But the young man had no desire to puff a pipe in Blossom's very face.

"Thanks; but I've tried it already, and fancy it's rather better than that I brought from the States. I should prefer a song now, if Miss Blossom would be so obliging."

Upon which Blossom tucked her curls behind her little pink ears, and sang not only one, but two or three, of her simple songs. They were not much to hear. I fear it was hardly worth while to bring the piano so far. Still the young man found it very agreeable to listen to the

quaver of the sweet, high-pitched voice. The air was thin and poor; the words soulless. They were something about lovers, and sighing and dying, from which, though interesting and awful enough in themselves, very silly verses can be made. She sang them correctly, lingering upon the notes where she had been taught to dwell, playing the accompaniments in horribly good time, and rising from her seat at last with a timid smile upon her lips. Neither she nor the young captain (who believed that Miss Claudia's Italian airs, to a strumming accompaniment on a Spanish guitar, were nothing so charming as these) gave a thought to the sorrows of the song, those happy, factitious sorrows, which come at most, only like a grateful cloud between us and the intense glow of our happiness.

"I wish you'd sing to Orme, — Lieutenant Orme, you know, — who came out with us. I'll bring him round some night, if you don't mind," Captain Elyot said, when Blossom, innocently satisfied with herself, had taken up her crocheting again. "He's the most homesick fellow on the plains; and, as I have taken him in hand, I feel tolerably responsible for his cure. If you have no objection, Mrs. Stubbs."

"I know him," Mrs. Stubbs said graciously. "There don't seem to be any harm in the boy. You may bring him round if you like; though I've no notion of opening the house to everybody, and you may as well stop there."

"I shouldn't think of bringing any one else," Captain Elyot said quickly. "Open the house to everybody! That was the last wish of his heart. "He is low-spirited, and has fallen into a set I don't like; and I fancied if he could break away from it in some way, by making new friends perhaps, he'd see the folly of it after a while."

"I should be very glad to sing to him," Blossom said timidly ; " that is, if you think he would care to hear me."

Care to hear her? It would be strange indeed if he did not.

"No fear of that. And I may bring him to-morrow night?" the captain asked quickly, fearful lest the tide might turn against his friend.

"If you please ;" and Blossom gave an anxious glance to her mother, who did not object.

And so it came to pass that the very next evening, and many more if the truth be told, found the young lieutenant in Mrs. Stubbs's parlor. He had objected at first.

"Oh, a plague on the women!" he had said, affecting, like a very young man as he was, *blasé*, ill-fitting airs. "I'd half promised Luttrell and the rest of 'em" —

"But I made a positive engagement," Captain Elyot said steadily. "And, Orme, there isn't a man at the post but would think himself in luck just now to have the chance to go there."

"Well, if you insist," said Orme, with the faintest possible air of martyrdom, resigning himself to circumstances.

But he forgot his unwillingness when Blossom came out of a corner to greet him. So this was the young man who was likely to fall into bad ways, and who only needed friends to set him right! Blossom's tender heart yearned over him with a real missionary desire for his well-doing. Oh, how angry he would have been, could he have known in what a light he had been made to appear before this charming girl, whose beauty and pretty shy ways startled him out of all indifference!

She sang to him over and over again. It was for this he had come. But she opened her eyes in wonder when the young lieutenant himself sat down to the piano, and to a dashing accompaniment trolled out a bold soldier-song in a fine, rich voice. There was something of the clink of glasses in the shivering chords, and women and death in the song, which brought a thrill to Blossom's untried heart, and tears to her eyes. She could not have expressed it in words; but she felt that this was not at all like her poor little songs, over which, with all their sighing and dying, nobody had thought of shedding a tear.

"Why did you ask me to sing?" she said, with the tears still in her eyes.

"Why?" repeated the young man, who seemed to have caught all of Blossom's shyness.

He had thrown the song off carelessly, and was astonished and immensely flattered by the undreamed-of result.

"You gave me a great pleasure," he said, with all his heart in the words.

Captain Elyot should have been quite triumphant over the chord of sympathy which these two seemed to have struck at once. But human nature is a bundle of contradictions; and for one short moment, as he saw the wonder, and almost awe, creeping over Blossom's face as the song rolled out, freighted with a love which defied death, he wished he had not brought him here. Then, ashamed of the ungenerous feeling, he settled himself in a corner, and listened to the two, who had ferreted some duets from an old music-book, and were patiently picking them out, regardless of other ears than their own. Bang, bang! went the heavy bass of the lieutenant.

ant's accompaniment. Blossom's shrill, sweet voice trembled as she came in out of all time, and was finally swept away entirely by the tenor, which skipped back and forth in a marvellous way from one part to another. The captain, uneasy in his shaded corner, pulled his mustache, and tried to believe that this was what he had striven to effect. But, for the first time in his life, he rebelled at the fate which had denied him a voice for singing. It was certainly very good discipline for the young man.

"I had no idea that it would be half so jolly," said the young lieutenant, when at last they had come away. "I'm under no end of obligations to you, Elyot, for taking me there. The old woman asked me to call again, and so I will. I promised Miss Blossom, by the way, to look in for an hour to-morrow morning, and try those duets again."

"Oh! you did, did you?" the captain replied rather grimly.

But, after all, was not this what he had desired to bring about?

CHAPTER X.

THE COUSIN ON THE JERSEY SHORE.

BUT it must not be supposed that pure friendliness had moved Mrs. Stubbs thus to introduce these wolves into her sheepfold ; for of men, both young and old, she had suddenly become suspicious.

“Does the old cat think we are after her and her money ?” said Captain Luttrell with an oath.

Captain Luttrell, being always in debt, and having nothing to depend upon but his pay and his winnings at cards, naturally resented such a suspicion.

“It would take the d—l of a spirit to stand in Stubbs’s shoes,” he added.

“Or none at all,” amended a young lieutenant of infantry, whose smooth face showed through the tobacco-smoke, somewhat after the fashion of Raphael’s beclouded cherubs.

“You’re right ; none at all, by —” repeated the captain ; “and that wouldn’t do for me, you know.”

But in truth, Mrs. Stubbs had never once thought of herself. It would seem as though the instinct of personal vanity, or self-consciousness indeed, which is late to die in a woman’s heart, had been crushed out of life in her : it had been made to stand aside for more vital

matters, or had been transferred to Blossom, in whom was all her pride now. No thought of personal adornment or personal triumph occurred to her. Her eyes were still bright and black, with a reddish heat in their depths; but the soft shine of her hair was broken by the rough gray threads that had found their way there. The fresh, high color, which had given her a kind of vulgar beauty, not unlike that of the gaudy prints with which Stubbs had delighted to bedeck his walls, had faded away. The blood had rushed to her heart that night when they brought her husband in stiff and stark, and it had forgotten its way back. And then she was no longer young, hardly middle-aged; and what was personal vanity to one in whom every passion but that of ambition was dead? If she had marked the change in herself from the old comeliness to the faded, listless face she bore now, it was only as she might have noticed the change in another woman, and with no pang like regret. She had lived her life (the life in which red cheeks and bright eyes play a part) so long ago as to have almost forgotten it. She had had her day: it was for fine ladies alone to try to lengthen this out into a kind of twilight. It was only in Blossom that the mother's vanity revived and glowed again. She delighted to see the child in the new-made gowns, the bright ribbons, and nameless gewgaws she had brought from the East, and which were tasteful and simple enough to please a more cultivated fancy. To her mind, they were not half fine enough. All the treasures of the store were open to Blossom. She had only to choose. She might have been swathed in silks, but that silks formed an insignificant part of the merchandise at the post.

It warmed the woman's heart with a wicked delight to see the envious eyes following the girl whenever she rode or walked under her mother's jealous care. Though outwardly unmoved, it rejoiced her soul to receive the artful flattery of the men about her. The tribute was for Blossom, though it passed through her hands. It was the child's due, and less than belonged to her by right. Not once did she dream of taking any of it to herself. But it was pouring treasures into the deep. The givers gained nothing by it. The household remained closed to them. As for Captain Luttrell, he was an object of indifference, or angry impatience, as he chose to conduct himself. Nothing was to be won by conciliating such as he. She had not spent her life, so far, among army people, without nourishing an unnatural idea of the importance of "family," nor without learning all that could be told of each one about her. To place Blossom upon an equality with the best of these, to make her a lady, — in that outer sense which gives so poor a definition of the word, — was the one object of the woman's life. Circumstances had brought Captain Elyot and Blossom together, and she rejoiced over it with silent but exultant joy. He had prospective wealth; but that was nothing. Was not Blossom rich already? with gold, and to spare, for whoever came wooing with the mother's consent? It was his fine family connections which had won him something more than toleration from the sutler's wife. She had heard Miss Claudia refer to these rather boastfully months before. Poor Miss Claudia had ceased to refer to Captain Elyot in any way now. She was unconscious, she was indifferent, she was every thing but proud and boastful now, when his name was mentioned. But the

indifference and the unconsciousness were so exaggerated that there was danger of both being misinterpreted. Mrs. Stubbs, indeed, called them by another name. But she had treasured unwittingly the words her ears had caught of the fine family to which Captain Elyot belonged. Here was the opportunity thrown into her own hands to put Blossom into the position she so coveted for her. Her eagerness almost outstripped her caution. If Captain Elyot had been less the true gentleman that he was, he would have seen through it all, kissed her pretty daughter perhaps, and laughed in the mother's face ; though he would have been a bold man, I confess. As it was, he took it all as simple friendliness, and gratitude for the slight service he had rendered the family. "Perhaps you'll look into the parlor a moment, the child seems a little low in her mind to-day ;" or "Maybe you'll be dropping in for an hour this evening, Captain Elyot ; Blossom was saying that she had not seen you for a week," Mrs. Stubbs would remark ; and the young man heard nothing in the words but an innocent desire to vary the monotony of the girl's life, and never dreamed of the purpose underlying them. He had stood by them in their great trouble : it was but natural that they should turn to him now. And had he not assured Blossom that he would be a brother to her ? The words had had a somewhat theatrical sound when he uttered them, though the feeling which gave rise to them had been honest and warm. Nor had it changed. He was, indeed, only partly conscious of the interest Blossom had aroused in him. The mother, it must be confessed, was hardly to his mind ; and the social position of the family was one which, in the eyes of those around him, would by no

means warrant the intimacy established. But, up to a certain point, lines of caste are but ropes of sand to a man. So he made his almost daily visits to Blossom, and defended the mother stoutly when occasion arose (and occasion seemed always upon the point of arising just now, when the Stubbsses were the centre of interest at the post). If Blossom had been any other than she was, he would hardly have taken this woman upon his shoulders. As it was, he staggered sometimes under his load. But what with envy among the men who did not share their favor, and jealous spite among the women, the Stubbsses were hardly used just now; and chance had made him their defender. No thought of consequences disturbed his mind.

For there was a distant cousin down upon the Jersey shore whom Captain Elyot had never seen, but who represented the dreadful future to him. During his late visit to the East, in one of those rash moments to which the most discreet are exposed, he had promised Uncle Jeremy that he would seek this cousin out, and come to some determination in regard to a matter which had been urged upon him so often of late as to become hateful.

Now, thinking it over, he could not see how he had been so weak. He had repented as soon as the promise was given; and, pleading an urgent recall to his regiment, had escaped without making the proposed visit. But there had come a letter from the old man in regard to the matter. It was inscribed in a cramped, stiff hand, and began, "Nephew Robert," this being the nearest approach to affectionate address in which Uncle Jeremy ever indulged.

It was about this far-off cousin that he had written, desiring Captain Elyot, in words very like a command,

to communicate with her by letter, since he had been unable to visit her. For a moment, as the young man read the words so galling to his spirit, he was tempted to write to his uncle that he wanted none of his money at such a price. But the money would be his by law: why should he give it up? Still, was he willing to fetter his whole future at a whim of the meddlesome old man, who had already, he wrote, prepared this cousin to hear from Captain Elyot?

"What does he take me for?" thought the young man angrily. "Write to this girl who may be — what must she not be to consent or be a party to such a scheme!"

And he thrust the letter into his desk, and strolled off down to the sutler's, from force of habit perhaps. It was a bright winter day, with great soft clouds rolling slowly across the sky, and the broad river one dazzling expanse of ice, gay with a crowd of skaters. Blossom stood behind the window, watching them with wistful eyes. A slight headache, succeeding a week of stormy weather, had shut her closely in the house, and exhausted her indoor amusements. She was tired of her needle, tired of her music, which, repeated again and again without a listener, sounded flat and dull even to her ears. She was disappointed in the novel Lieutenant Orme had brought her the night before. The hero had proved false, and left a sigh in the girl's heart. But all heroes could not prove false, she thought, with a blush creeping up her face. And then somebody rapped at the door; and the color touched her hair when Captain Elyot stepped into the room.

"Why are you not out with the others?" he asked stupidly. He knew very well, if he had given it a thought,

that no one of the ladies, at least, would have invited her. But the words had been mechanical. He was thinking, as she turned from the window, how unlike this girl, with her quick flush and shy ways, must be to the cousin down on the Jersey shore, who was waiting for a letter from him. The deep crimson gown and slender gold chain about Blossom's neck seemed to make the whole room bright. Even her mourning, or the outward semblance of it, was done by proxy. It was Mrs. Stubbs who wore the ugly black gowns with stiff rebellious folds. "He liked to see ye look pretty," the mother had said. So Blossom wore the colors which gratified her own taste, fancying, in some indefinable way, that she pleased her father also; while Mrs. Stubbs assumed the serge and sackcloth.

Captain Elyot picked up the book Blossom had laid down, and, turning it over, read Lieutenant Orme's name in pencil on the fly-leaf. What did Orme mean by forming her taste after such a model, the weakest of diluted sentiment! He would speak to the boy.

"Silly trash! I beg your pardon," he continued; for Blossom showed her mortification in her face. She had shed more tears over its sorrows than she would have cared to own. "Tell me truly, Miss Blossom, what did you think of it?"

"I — I wished he had come back," Blossom replied rather unintelligibly, referring to the hero, who had proved false.

Captain Elyot laughed outright.

"The hero? Oh! but they never do, — heroes of this kind, who get to be written about. It is only we matter-of-fact, dull fellows in every-day life, who really stand by the women we pretend to love, even though" —

What Captain Elyot was about to say, since he waxed earnest as he went on, what he would have blundered into saying, his mind having wandered far from the book in his hand, cannot be told. He stopped short without finishing his sentence.

"But—but that is like a hero," said Blossom, roused to an unusual intelligence by this burst of feeling, which she did not in the least comprehend. She was only made aware all at once, and she knew not how, that these were her heroes of whom he was speaking almost in derision. The book had done her no great harm.

"Perhaps," the captain replied, with a shrug of his shoulders. "But they would never find themselves in a novel. Simple constancy is not dramatic enough. And, after all, a man is scarcely a hero who only follows his inclination. But put on your hat, Miss Blossom. Your mother has given you into my care for an hour, and I am going to take you out on the ice."

Blossom's happy face was a reward in itself to the young man as she hastened away to don the little fur-lined sack and a Scotch-frieze cap she had found among her mother's stores. Pinned up on one side with the wing of a pigeon, it was not an unbecoming skating-cap.

Miss Laud and Claudia Bryce, with two or three young officers, formed a group close by the shore as Captain Elyot and Blossom descended to the river. The young ladies had donned their skates, and were adjusting scarfs and hats, and buttoning gloves preparatory to striking out, when the new-comers appeared. They all greeted Captain Elyot—the young men, whose eyes followed Blossom's pretty figure—with rather unne-

cessary heartiness. Miss Bryce, after a conventional bow and smile, gave a final pull at the scarf she had been tying, and swept away followed by the others; but Miss Laud managed to give Blossom a nod and a word in passing. She had whispered hastily to Claudia when she saw them approaching, —

“Do speak to her, Claudia: you will never regret it.”

“Not I,” Claudia had replied aloud. Then she gave Captain Elyot the bow and smile already spoken of, but which were too narrow to take in his companion. She poised herself for an instant to tie her scarf (she would not have the appearance of running away from this girl); then she struck off with a peculiar, undulating movement entirely her own. Miss Bryce’s face might not be handsome; it was thin, and lacking in color; her hair and eyes, too, were pale: but her figure was fine, even at rest, and in motion it was the perfection of grace.

Captain Elyot, engrossed in fitting the skates to Blossom’s little feet, took in nothing of this side-scene. He had marked Claudia’s cool bow. It reminded him only that his relations with the Bryces had not been quite so intimate since his return as formerly. For this he doubtless was to blame. He had neglected to call at the major’s of late. But one does not always take up old threads after a long absence; and the habit of dropping in there had unconsciously slipped away from him.

“Halloo, Elyot!— You here, Miss Blossom? How jolly! I was just on the way to see if your mother would trust you to me.” And Lieutenant Orme came up in a flourish of incomprehensible figures, including a low salaam, which had nearly ended in a somersault. “But where are your skates, Elyot?”

“I forgot them.”

To tell the truth, he had never thought of them till this moment. He had not intended to appear on the ice. But, passing Blossom's window, he had caught a glimpse of her wistful eyes following the skaters. To resist their unconscious pleading was impossible. He rushed into the store, took Mrs. Stubbs by storm, obtained her consent, and had Blossom out of the house before a thought of his own lack of preparation occurred to him.

“All right, then: you'll have to hand her over to me,” said the boy coolly. “You're not afraid, Miss Blossom?”

“Oh, no!” replied Blossom doubtfully. She was entirely confused by this new arrangement.

“Give me your hand,” said the lieutenant; and, before she could object, she was swept away.

Captain Elyot looked after them with an amused but slightly bewildered expression of countenance. It may be that his eyes betrayed another feeling unacknowledged, as they followed Blossom's figure growing less each moment in the distance.

“She has a lovely face.”

The voice spoke close beside him. It was Miss Laud, who had approached unnoticed.

“If you will be so good,” she was saying to her cavalier, despatching him on some errand to the house. “I will wait here. Captain Elyot will bear me company. “Yes, she has a lovely face,” she repeated when they were left alone.

“Do you think so?” replied the young man, quite off his guard. And, forgetting that this girl was almost a stranger, he suffered the thought in his mind to spring

from his lips: "but I'm afraid it is going to be disagreeable for her here. I think they might be more kind to her."

"And so do I," assented Miss Laud. "For my own part, I should be glad to know her, though I cannot take the initiative, being only a visitor. I wish, indeed, 'they' would be more kind to her, as you say. But, after all, Captain Elyot, you can hardly expect the ladies at the post to make the sutler's daughter quite one of themselves."

"And why not?" asked the young man, with more heat than wisdom.

"Why, indeed?" and Miss Laud raised her eyebrows, and proceeded to cut graceful curves upon the ice, her hands thrust into the pockets of her natty little jacket. With all her good-will toward Claudia and Claudia's lover (as she regarded this young man), she could not be expected to lose sight entirely of her own interests. "Why, indeed?" she repeated, balancing herself before him, and preparing to argue the question. "You gentlemen think her very pretty, and all that, and blame the women for not taking her up. Yes, you do. I heard Captain Luttrell last night. He was passing our window with Lieutenant Gibbs; and he used an oath too. It is not nice in you gentlemen, the way you talk when we ladies are out of the way. He raved about her with his oaths, the great swearing captain, — as though she would look at him! You think the ladies are in fault, I say, because they don't make her one of themselves; but, after all, they are more kind to her than you, who would amuse yourselves. She is fresh and a new face; but no one of you would forget himself to marry her," said the artfully frank young lady.

“What do you mean?” stammered the young man, growing red.

Miss Laud’s escort appeared at this moment.

“Would *you*?” she threw back saucily as she swept away?

Would he? What a shield an impertinent woman could make of her sex! Would he marry the sutler’s daughter? No, of course not: he was already implicated in another affair. And then, as Blossom’s innocent face rose before him, there rose beside it another, and by no means a pleasing vision, of the cousin down on the Jersey shore. How he hated the whole subject! And what did this girl mean by thrusting it upon him? He was chilled with standing upon the ice. But he could not desert Blossom, having brought her here. While he was trying to decide whether to leave and go in search of his own skates, or seek the lieutenant, who had carried the girl off without so much as an apology, he saw them coming toward him, her little figure swaying hither and thither, her hand clasped in Orme’s. Her cheeks had caught the red glow of the sunset; the sun itself was reflected from her eyes. Something like jealousy touched his heart. Still what did it matter? She was nothing to him, and the boy was his friend.

But though he borrowed the lieutenant’s skates, at Blossom’s shy suggestion, and took a turn or two, with her beside him, he was silent, and not like himself at all. Poor Blossom wondered if she could have vexed him. She stole anxious glances at him from time to time as they went on, but dared not speak, save in reply to his occasional words. No one avoided them, apparently; and yet they were always alone; while the

others formed zigzag lines, or improvised a dance, cutting strange figures, noisily merry, — a gay company, in which Blossom never for a moment found herself. To an outsider Captain Elyot might have seemed to blame for this; for, looking neither to right nor left, he guided her straight on, past them all, to where only the river with its broad sweep was before them. On and on they went in the face of the wind, toward the sunset, Blossom's crimson skirts and little red scarf flying out like pennons behind them, the gay voices sounding farther and farther away.

"You do not care for them? It is far more pleasant off here, with the river all to ourselves," Captain Elyot said carelessly, but with a sharp glance at the wistful face, that would turn of itself toward the merry party as the two swept by.

"Yes," Blossom assented; but her eyes belied the word, and it came out with a sigh.

It was a little thing; but it touched the young man unaccountably. A few words, a smile or two, that they would never miss from their store of good-nature, would make this child so happy! and yet they withheld both. He hated them all as they turned, and came back more slowly. The sun had dropped out of sight; the air was icy. Every one was hastening toward the shore as they came up. Lieutenant Orme was taking off Miss Laud's skates.

"How sure your strokes are!" that young woman said, with an approving nod, to Blossom, who blushed and glowed under this praise. But Captain Elyot received it stoically. He was somewhat doubtful as to Miss Laud's good-will. "Yes: I was telling Lieutenant Orme just now, that you and he were the best-matched

couple on the ice," she went on mischievously, quietly watching Captain Elyot's face, which flushed in spite of himself.

"I beg your pardon, I fear I hurt you," he said to Blossom, whose skate-strap he was undoing. He had given it a sudden twitch. But no: Blossom was conscious of nothing but a glow of happiness in her little heart. She smiled her good-by to this new friend, sorry, and wondering that the captain should take her away in such haste. He gave Miss Laud a bow, stiff and ceremonious, withal so frozen, that it would have set Blossom to trembling with fright, had it been bestowed upon her. But Miss Laud only smiled saucily: she was by no means extinguished. Captain Elyot left Blossom at her door, and went on to his quarters. Once there, he bolted his door, and began to walk back and forth, his thumbs caught in his pockets, his head bent, and a scowl on his forehead. At last he sat down before his desk, and began to write a reply to his uncle's letter received so long before. It was with tardy haste, inasmuch as weeks had gone by since its reception, and no mail would leave the fort now for some days. He dashed off the first sentence or two with a scratch of his pen. It mattered little to him, he wrote, whom he married, if marry he must. Still — and this came after the first heat and a considerable pause — he should hardly like to make a distinct proposition to any girl until he had seen her. However, he would try for a brief leave of absence early in the spring; or he might, perhaps, leave the service entirely.

He folded and sealed his letter with rather unusual care, remembering with some annoyance, as he did so, that he must prepare to go around to Major Bryce's.

Mrs. Bryce had waylaid him upon the river, and asked him to tea, feeling, no doubt, that it was time she came to Claudia's assistance. "Quite a family party, to meet no one but ourselves," she had assured him. But with a vivid recollection of Claudia's cool greeting, and Miss Laud's over-frank speech, this was not an inviting prospect.

CHAPTER XI.

A GAME OF CARDS.

I TELL you, Claudia, the man is in love with her," said Miss Laud, pausing, with her hat half removed from her head, to utter this oracular remark. They were disrobing in Claudia's bedroom after their hour on the ice.

Claudia bent over a refractory button, hiding her face.

"Why do you think so?"

"I tried him. I praised her, and he was ridiculously pleased; then I abused her a little, and he forgot his manners, and was angry at once. What a fool the man must be! There is nothing pretty about the girl, but her pink-and-white face, and a pair of eyes which she knows how to use."

"It was coming over the plains together," said Claudia with a sigh.

Fate had been cruel to her. If she had but been in Blossom's place!

"And he thought the ladies might be more kind to her," Miss Laud went on, recalling every part of her conversation with Captain Elyot, and making her own selections from it.

"Did he, indeed!" Claudia said with scorn.

This was entirely too much. It certainly was hard to bear from Claudia's point of view.

"I presume he thinks we should all receive her, if he made her his wife?"

Miss Claudia had brought an unusual color from her exercise on the ice; and her voice just now had a touch of the sharp air they had left outside.

"And you would not?" said Miss Laud half interrogatively, as she began to brush out her thick auburn hair.

"I!"

Claudia's expression and attitude were tragic.

"Still I do think it would have been wiser to show her some civility," her friend went on.

Claudia's obstinacy had only foiled her desires. She had only made the girl appear ill used. And what so natural now as that Captain Elyot should take up her defence? If the affair had been in her hands, thought Miss Laud, she could have managed it after a much better fashion, and brought him round at last, in spite of Miss Pretty-face. She forgot that Claudia, angry, and fancying herself ill used, had not her cool little head.

"I had no idea it was so late," she said, looking at her watch. "We shall hardly be dressed in time. Why Claudia, you have not begun. You forget that he is coming to tea."

"Coming to tea!"

The blood swept over Claudia's thin face.

"I supposed you knew it. Yes, I heard your mother ask him on the ice."

"I don't know why she should: he has only called here once since he came back."

"I don't know why she should; but she certainly did," Miss Laud replied gayly.

There was a pleasing excitement in the prospect of this visit. She need not be ungracious because Claudia chose to consider herself neglected. And Miss Laud made her toilet with unusual care, loosening her hair into soft waves about her face, and choosing the most becoming, though the plainest, of the gowns she had brought from the States. To tell the truth, she was glad of a little change. She was becoming tired of Claudia's continued ill-humor, which sufficed to make every one uncomfortable, without bringing any thing to pass. Claudia's lovers, and Claudia's disappointment and vexation, were amusing enough for a time; but, since the affair appeared so hopeless, she began to think that her friend might pluck up more spirit, and forget it all.

"I don't know why you should not ask him here," she said. "It would be very strange to ostracize him, when there is really nothing as yet."

"How can you say there is nothing?" replied Claudia, who had sat down listlessly upon the bed in spite of her friend's warning as to the lateness of the hour.

"He may be engaged to her, for all we know. I am sure he is there half the time."

"He may be," said Miss Laud slowly.

She was turning her head this way and that to observe the effect of the back of her gown in the small glass.

"Still I don't believe it. He is just the man to take up a girl whom everybody neglected; but men don't marry so. He'll never think of marrying her, unless somebody puts it into his head."

She did not tell how she had suggested it to him that very afternoon, from a spiteful impulse, for which she was vexed with herself a moment later. What a foolish speech she had made, to be sure! And what if he should act upon it, and marry the girl! It would be a shame for him to thus throw himself away. Miss Laud was tempted to enter the lists herself, since Claudia showed so little spirit.

"But you will never be ready," she said, putting the last pin into her hair. "Do bestir yourself, dear: I believe he has come already. I heard a strange voice."

"I shall do nothing at all," Claudia said, folding her hands upon the lap of her plain brown dress.

"But do put on a bit of ribbon, or something to brighten your gown."

Miss Laud was certainly very good-natured. She searched among her own trinkets and furbelows for a knot of soft blue silk, and fastened it with her own hands at Claudia's throat.

"You never looked better," she said, standing off, and viewing her friend critically. "You really have quite a bright color, dear."

Captain Elyot, in the mean time, was sitting in the parlor with the major's wife, entirely unconscious of the judgment being passed upon him in the next room. It was a cheerful apartment, though neither so spacious, nor so pretentiously furnished, as the one where Blossom was accustomed to receive him. There was a pot of roses in the window, over which the curtain was now drawn; there were roses also blooming upon the wall-paper (some former occupant of the rude quarters had stretched it crookedly from ceiling to floor); and there was a square of bright carpet spread upon the

uneven floor. Altogether, the major's parlor had been considered a most sumptuous apartment until Blossom's arrival and the changes at the sutler's quarters. The roses upon the wall seemed to swell and nod upon their stems in the firelight, in answer to the great red bow upon the cap of the major's wife, which bobbed up and down as she nodded her head. She was striving to entertain her guest until the young ladies should appear, and she could escape to superintend affairs in the kitchen. Jinny's broad face had filled up a crack in the doorway more than once during the past fifteen minutes. But her loud, cheerful tone was not in accord with Captain Elyot's mood to-night.

"Yes, yes, to be sure," he said, hardly knowing to what he was bowing assent.

It did not matter. Mrs. Bryce still went on pouring out a flood of commonplace intelligence or comment, — concerning the prospect of snow, the thaw last week, the condition of the ice, — until he grew dizzy in the dark corner where he sat, over the bobbing crimson bow, the bobbing red face, and the roses starting into bloom whenever the light touched them.

"And where have you been so long?" she asked at last, but still without waiting for a reply. The question was only a text, indeed. "It is not well for you young men to desert your old friends, or to avoid society when there are ladies at the post. I would never have thought it of you, Captain Elyot."

"I am not aware that I have avoided society. Certainly I have not intended to desert my friends," replied the young man, somewhat surprised by this sudden attack. "I have been unusually busy since my return, and have made few visits, I know; but a man

finds something to do in his company after a three-months' absence."

"Yes," Mrs. Bryce assented, in a doubtful tone, and with an expression which would have been arch in a young and pretty woman, but which only struck Captain Elyot as being uncommonly disagreeable.

She did not intend to read him a lecture; but the opportunity was tempting, and it was her privilege to advise the young officers. Did she not stand to them in the place of a mother?

"I fear the toddy down at Mrs. Stubbs's is more to the taste of the unmarried officers than a dance with the young ladies, or a rubber of whist with the old ones. Considering our resources, we are shamefully dull this winter."

"But there is no toddy at Mrs. Stubbs's. All that is changed, you know."

Captain Elyot was roused to attention now. Drinking and carousing in Blossom's parlor! The woman knew better. It was a shameful slander.

"Ah, yes, yes!" she said, wagging her head wisely, and setting the red ribbons to fluttering again. "I don't expect you to tell tales; but we all know what Stubbs's was—and is yet, I don't doubt, in a quiet way."

"You have been misinformed, madam."

He was too angry to elaborate his denial; and her sex intrenched her about, and made it impossible for him to answer her as he would have done if she had been a man. A man! No gentleman would have made such an unfounded statement. But he hated her for the moment, sitting by her own fireside, and hearing her gabble on amiably about other matters. She had dealt her

blow; and he had staggered under it, as she fancied. She had no desire to repeat it. And it might be that he only needed to have his folly pointed out to him in order to amend. She knew very well that Mrs. Stubbs's toddy did not entice him to the sutler's. But she was too wise a woman to bring up Blossom's name. It was enough for him to know that his frequent visits to the store and to Mrs. Stubbs's house were noticed and commented upon.

Then Claudia, followed by her friend, entered the room; and Mrs. Bryce's words became all gracious and kind, diamonds and pearls having taken the place of toads and scorpions.

"Yes, quite well, thank you," Claudia said in reply to his greeting, coming forward with her slow, graceful motion, and a smile upon her lips.

It was a good deal like a painted smile; but it answered the purpose, for, at the moment, the young man was not inclined to be critical.

"She is a little thin, I fancy," broke in Mrs. Bryce, calling attention to Claudia's defection in beauty. "It has been such a dull winter!"

If she had intended this for another reproach, it was quite thrown away. To Captain Elyot's mind the words only recalled Mrs. Stubbs's little formula, "It is so dull for the child!" Mrs. Stubbs might be rough and coarse in her ways; but at least she was straightforward and true, he thought, losing himself again in a revery, from which he was aroused by Mrs. Bryce's bustling out of the room, Jinny's face having appeared once more in the doorway.

The major appeared a moment later, and with him Lieutenant Gibbs, evidently an invited guest. The

lieutenant glared with mild ferocity over his mustache at the young captain seated, as he fancied, so comfortably between the two young ladies. But nothing is more wasted in quantities than envy; and the lieutenant need not have made himself miserable over Captain Elyot's happiness, since the latter was heartily wishing himself away. All had changed since the days when he used to spend so much of his time here. Was the change in himself, or them? And what had stripped the place of its charm?

What a fine girl he had thought Miss Claudia to be in those days! (He looked back as though years rolled between, though scarcely three months had passed since then.) She was still elegant in manner, unexceptionable in dress; but she was not the same to him. He watched her now, politely affable to Lieutenant Gibbs, and pronounced her cold and artificial. As for the major's wife, with her meddlesome ways — Then he remembered himself with a start. He was angry with them all to-night, or was the discord in himself? But he must not forget that he was a guest in this house; and he rose from the corner, and crossed the room to where Miss Laud was seated, with some voluminous knitting in her small white hands.

"And what do you find to engage your time in this desolate region?" he asked lightly, conscious, as he spoke, of the awful bore of trying to make himself agreeable, and to this girl above all.

"Is it a desolate region?" Miss Laud asked in reply.

She evidently cherished no resentment. She opened her big eyes as she threw back her head to reply, crossing her hands becomingly upon the scarlet wool on her lap.

"I am sure very sweet flowers bloom here," she

added; and his eyes followed hers to where Claudia stood before the mantel, stately and tall, and with a bright color to-night, not unlike a fine dahlia, indeed.

"Only exotics, and soon to be transplanted," he replied in the same tone.

"Yes, that will be Claudia's fate, I suppose," she said demurely, going back to her knitting.

"Probably: it is the fate of all young ladies, is it not?"

"To which you resign us without a sigh."

"Why not, since we of the other sex are to gain by it?"

What an odd girl! One could never imagine what she might say next. He had by no means forgotten their passage-at-arms on the ice this afternoon, and was on his guard. But there was all the fascination of danger in her speech. At least she was unaffected, and he could talk to her without embarrassment, though at the risk of being called upon to defend himself at every turn. With Claudia, for some unaccountable reason, he was ill at ease, and blessed the chance which still found him at Miss Laud's side when the tea was brought in. He strove to make himself agreeable to that young woman, — feeling it a duty toward his hostess to exert himself, — and with so surprising a result, that Claudia threw more than one reproachful glance across the room to her friend.

But Miss Laud was reckless of consequences. She was tired of being kept in the background, of being simply a receptacle for Claudia's sighs and tears. Because Captain Elyot had become indifferent to the charms of her friend was surely no reason why every other girl should be forbidden speaking to him.

"I don't know how I can ever get through with it," Claudia had said to her friend in the sanctuary of the bedroom, referring to this evening.

"I will assist you, dear; don't give it a thought," Miss Laud had replied.

And so she did: in fact, she quite took the burden of entertaining the young man upon her own shoulders. His ill-humor disappeared. Almost before he knew it, he had forgotten his annoyance of the afternoon, and they had become friends. He had even promised to take her out on the ice the next day. Claudia had chosen to treat him coldly; her smile had not deceived him; her mother had reproached him openly: but they should see that he was indifferent to it all. The major swallowed his tea and hurried away, pleading an engagement.

"Don't let me disturb you," he said with a good-natured nod to the young men. "I'll excuse you if I hear you asked for."

The major was always pleading an engagement which took him away from his own home, though some of the other officers found it a pleasant enough place: so, a few short months before, had Captain Elyot. Hardly a day went by then, without his dropping in here morning or evening, urged to come by the major's wife, and more gently invited by Miss Claudia. They had read together by the hour,—he and Claudia. From the corner where he sat he could see now a volume of Tennyson over which they had pored side by side. There were passages in it marked by Claudia's hand, if she had not effaced the faint pencilling. The young man was by no means of a sentimental turn of mind: he could hardly be said to be fond of poetry, with the exception of

some stanzas of Scott and Byron. But to read verse with a delicate feminine profile beside your own, and with a very slim white hand to turn the leaves, is like having it set to music. And this was the way Captain Elyot had read Tennyson. Did Claudia remember it? He looked across the room to where, at his sudden glance, she had resumed a most animated conversation with Lieutenant Gibbs, whose dull face was aglow with pleasure. It struck him that there was something more than gratified vanity in the lieutenant's countenance. Certain rumors floating about the post, which he had not heeded, for indifference, recurred to him now. These might account for the reserve in Claudia's manner. And did Gibbs read poetry with her now? And had she pencilled the lines afresh? He cared nothing for Claudia: with the exception of this poetry, there had been, at least to his mind, nothing approaching sentiment in their intercourse. He had ceased his visits of his own will, and simply because the place no longer attracted him; but still the thought that perhaps Claudia and the lieutenant did now turn the pages of the little book together brought a momentary sensation not entirely pleasant.

"Was ever any one so incomprehensible?" thought Miss Laud, pulling at her needles with a twitch that sent all the stitches off. She had addressed some playful remark to the young man leaning over her chair, who had been all attention but a moment before, and it hung, as it were, suspended-in air. A sudden fit of abstraction had wiped out all consciousness of her words or her presence.

"Where is the card-table?" exclaimed Mrs. Bryce, rousing from a surreptitious nap in the shadow filling

one end of the room. "Claudia dear, perhaps the gentlemen would take a hand at whist. Jinny shall bring more lights."

So Claudia set out the card-table, the young men hastening to her assistance with more alacrity than zeal. To Lieutenant Gibbs the *tête-à-tête* with Claudia in the dim light was far preferable. Poor Claudia! who talked at random, or not at all, while her jealous ears strove to catch every word uttered at the other end of the room.

"I give you fair warning that we propose to win all the honors," said Miss Laud in a lively tone, as they gathered about the table at last.

Captain Elyot was beside her; and she glanced from Claudia to him as she spoke, appropriating him to herself. They had arranged it between them, or Kitty had managed to bring it about, thought unhappy Claudia, her wrath rising against her friend. But the lieutenant's dull face shone as he hastened to take the place opposite Miss Bryce.

"There should be a stake to redeem our playing of utter stupidity," the reckless young woman ran on. She had incurred Claudia's severe displeasure, and was careless of what came now. "What a pity that the time has gone by when a lady's hand was the venture!" she added, with a mischievous laugh and a side-glance toward her friend.

"Is it possible that you would be so gracious?" Captain Elyot asked gallantly, with an open glance of admiration toward the hand with which Miss Laud was tossing the cards into the pack.

"I? Oh! I was not thinking of myself at all," she replied boldly.

Lieutenant Gibbs's stupid face turned angry and scarlet to the bristles of his close-clipped hair. He regarded Claudia doubtfully, the scowl deepening on his face as he looked from Miss Laud to Captain Elyot. Were these two plotting against him?

"*Has* that time gone by?" asked Captain Elyot, with a sudden straight look into Claudia's crimsoning face, and a dangerous light in his eyes. A headlong spirit of daring, a recklessness as to consequences, had taken possession of him at the suggestion of this girl.

"What nonsense, Kitty! One moment — I have forgotten to cut."

Claudia was the first to recover herself, though her self-possession had nearly slipped out of her grasp.

That moment was the climax of the evening. The hour which followed was quiet almost to dullness. Even Miss Laud's high spirits were subdued; and the game went on in silence. She felt that she had gone too far, and looked forward with anxiety to Claudia's judgment and Claudia's anger when the guests should have departed. In truth, she was not a little frightened, and blundered over her game, throwing down her cards in so careless a manner as to call forth a deserved rebuke from Miss Bryce, which only made matters worse, since Captain Elyot came to her defence, as in duty bound.

A more uncomfortable evening among four people could hardly be imagined; but it came to an end at last.

"Good-night!" said Captain Elyot at parting from Claudia. He had taken her hand; he retained it for an instant, since he fancied Lieutenant Gibbs watched him with uneasiness.

“I hope you will allow me to come in sometimes as — as I used to.”

The last four words wrought more mischief than he dreamed of. They roused to life all the dead hopes in the heart of the girl whose hand slipped out of his as he uttered them.

“You know you were always welcome.”

Her low voice, with its strange, soft tone, screened the reply from the others.

“Are you going home?” the lieutenant asked Captain Elyot coldly, as the door closed after them.

“N-o, I believe not,” he replied with suavity, — that cool suavity so exasperating in a man who has had the best of it for the past hour.

“Good-night, then,” the lieutenant said in a still more icy tone; and the young men separated.

Captain Elyot strolled off in the direction of the sutler's quarters. It was still early, the night was fine; and he had no mind to sleep, or to join the party whom he would probably find at cards at this hour. He was ill at ease, and more angry at himself than he would have acknowledged, for the folly of the past hour. Good heavens, what a fool he must be! He had nearly committed himself to Miss Bryce! What did he care for the girl, that he should have dared her to pick up his reckless words, which might have been interpreted to mean any thing, every thing! And, as though this were not enough, he had begged her, at parting, to receive him upon the old intimate terms! He had been a fool — and false, which was worse. But that mischievous girl had spurred him on, he thought angrily, searching about for some one upon whom to lay the blame of his folly.

There was no light behind the window of Blossom's

parlor as he passed the house. But he had not intended to call at this hour, though he remembered that he had promised to look in when he left Mrs. Bryce's, if it was not too late. Had she expected him? His heart had been stirred by all manner of tormenting emotions; but it grew still as a summer sea at a vision of Blossom's pretty, soft-tinted face. She had looked for him, without doubt. He even fancied she might have shed tears—such a child as she was—over his not coming. He would see her early the next day, and explain, making an excuse of the fine weather, which could not last long, to take her out skating again. And then it occurred to him that he had already invited Miss Laud—and, he began to suspect, at her own suggestion. He turned back hastily toward his own quarters, bestowing any thing but blessings upon the head of that officious young woman.

As for Miss Laud, the Fates were better to her than her fears. That one moment at the door, when, from a late instinct of caution, she had engrossed the attention of Lieutenant Gibbs while Captain Elyot made his adieus to Claudia, had saved her from all she dreaded.

“O Kitty!” said her friend, when they were shut into their bedroom, and the house was still, “did you see—did you hear him when he asked to be permitted to come again ‘as he used’? What did he mean? What could he mean?”

“Did he say that?”

“They were his very words.”

“It is strange, very strange. I hardly know what to think,” Miss Laud responded.

At first she had been too much bewildered by the happy turn of affairs to heed what her friend was say-

ing. She had expected the most violent reproaches; and Claudia had forgotten her altogether. Now, brought back to Miss Bryce and her affairs, she knew not what to believe of this young man, whose ways were so unexpected, who had flushed at the mention of one girl with the heat of a lover, and would have staked his chances with another on the turn of a card.

"It can mean nothing but that he is coming back to me," said Claudia in a dreamy, unreal voice, too happy to notice that she had replied to her own query.

"Yes," Miss Laud said thoughtfully. "Perhaps it is so. It seems like it; and yet" —

"Perhaps! What else can it be? You can't think, Kitty" — She stopped short, and faced her friend, the color flying to her hair.

"What is it, Claudia?" Since she was not to meet the reproaches she had looked for, Miss Laud was quite cool and assured.

"You can't believe that he asked to come here — to see you?" Claudia burst out with a gasp.

"Oh, dear, no! I wish he had." There was a convincing frankness in Miss Laud's reply. "He never gave me a thought, I can assure you, though he was so polite as to ask me to skate with him to-morrow, after I had twice suggested that the ice could hardly remain many days in its present delightful condition, and that I preferred skating to any thing in the world. No, indeed, Claudia, his mind was not upon me. I was tempted to give him up more than once. There is no pleasure in doing your best to entertain a man whose thoughts are elsewhere. His abstraction at times was positively embarrassing. I confess I don't at all understand him; but he was not thinking of me." And

Miss Laud moved toward the glass, and began to take off the tinkling jet ornaments which had sparkled in Captain Elyot's eyes with so little effect all the evening.

"You are a good girl, Kitty. Sometimes I think it must be stupid enough for you here. I have had no heart for any thing. But we'll have a dance before long, or a skating-carnival, with masks and Chinese lanterns: Mrs. Stubbs has some, I know. We'll start about it to-morrow, while the ice is in good condition. Or would you rather have a dance indoors? There are your pretty dresses you have never had a chance to wear."

"Oh, no! the carnival by all means. We could improvise a fancy costume."

"And dance on the ice, though I should be sure to have neuralgia after it. We can do both. We are sure to have distinguished visitors later in the season: we always do. And then we'll give a grand ball! You have no idea of our resources, or how gay we can be." And Claudia went to bed with a lighter heart than she had known for a long time.

CHAPTER XII.

DID HE SAY HE SHOULD COME AGAIN?

BUT the skating-carnival was doomed never to take place. Claudia's zeal waned before the preparations were well under way. After hope, despair. In these alternations the days passed, until angry jealousy took the place of both, and put an end to all desire to please and entertain her visitor; for Claudia now looked in vain for the renewal of the old intimacy with Captain Elyot, who did not avail himself of the permission she had given him that night at the door. He often passed the house, either alone or with companions; sometimes she met him face to face. He went in and out at Mrs. Stubbs's (she herself had seen him); but he did not come to her. It tormented her day and night. If she only knew the cause of his staying away, she would be satisfied, she said to herself. Why had he asked to come, if he had not desired it? What could it be that stood in the way? Not that she went about sighing and groaning, and wringing her hands. Civilization has turned a key upon expression. No: Claudia lived her usual life, to outward seeming, even partaking of the pleasures that came in her way, though without the heart to originate any. She was quiet, — perhaps more

so than in former times, — cool, and, if the truth be told, a little cross in the sanctity of her own home, where one may certainly be allowed some privileges of expression. But Captain Elyot never dreamed of the mischief his careless words had wrought. They had passed from his mind, with a faint regret over their having been uttered, before he reached his quarters. If any thought of the evening lingered long with him, it was over Blossom, who had, without doubt, expected him. He fancied her alone, — as she was so many hours of the day, — listening for his knock at the door, turning her soft brown eyes toward it at every step outside; for notwithstanding Lieutenant Orme's occasional notice of the girl, and his freaks of kindly attention, it was to Elyot himself that she looked for her pleasures, and the relief from the dulness of her life at the post. He had promised to teach her cribbage. They were to have made a beginning this night.

But Blossom had not passed so forlorn an evening as he imagined. It is well for people to learn that they are not the hinges upon which the lives of others turn; and the young man would have received a shock of surprise, to say the least, had he passed her window an hour earlier than he did. The clear stillness of the winter night outside was shivered by the sound of young voices singing within the parlor, — not the doleful ditties which Blossom bestowed upon her friends, but gay two-part songs and merry glees, from an old book Lieutenant Orme had picked up elsewhere. Some jolly fellow, ordered into the wilderness, had left it behind. They were droll songs to Blossom, with their "Tirra-la-las," — all about hunting and scenting, and rising betimes, and full of the blast of horns. Blossom's

little fingers skipped and hopped about the keys, — no fox in the chase was ever more bewildered. But Mrs. Stubbs, at the farther end of the room, taking her ease after the perplexing business of the day, thought it all wonderfully fine, and rejoiced over the girl's happy laugh, which filled every pause, and took the place of more than one difficult passage.

"You left early last night," Captain Elyot said to Lieutenant Orme, the next morning after the tea-party at the major's.

"I was not with them at all," replied Orme. "I spent the evening at the Stubbses."

The room was uncomfortably warm; but this was like a blast of cool air in Elyot's face. So Blossom had not sighed in solitude, and the young man went there at his own pleasure now!

"There's a nice little girl for you," the lieutenant went on, between puffing away at his meerschaum, and critically eying its tint. "No sort of nonsense about her. I asked her to go out on the ice this afternoon."

"Indeed!"

"Yes; but the old woman objected. It was too cold, she said. I assured her that there was every prospect of a change in the weather, but all for nothing. She held out against me, and I confess I gave it up rather than rouse her. They say there isn't such a temper within a thousand miles, if a spark happens to strike her. I've no desire to be that spark; and, besides, she might deny me the house if I proved troublesome. I'll try her again the first mild day. Or suppose you ask her, old fellow. She'd never refuse you. You might take Miss Blossom out, as you did the other day, and then turn her over to me."

"I *might*," the captain said, with a grim smile.

"That would be the surest way," the lieutenant went on meditatively. "Her mother would never say no to you. Yes, she's a good little girl!"

He apostrophized her with a sigh, raising a cloud of incense in the silence his companion did not break.

Captain Elyot did not forget his promise to Miss Laud. The afternoon was fine, and they spent a long hour on the ice. Claudia watched them set out, from behind the curtain of her room, where she was hidden, with a beating heart, and a twinge of jealousy she could not overcome.

"What if he asks for you when he calls?"

Miss Laud was determined to steer clear of all dangers, after her narrow escape the night before.

"You had better be ready, so that he need not wait," Claudia had replied calmly. "Of course, if he asks for me, I shall see him. But in that case he might feel obliged to invite me to go with you."

"Why, then you would."

"Then I would not," said Claudia, with some heat. "Unless — unless there should be something very particular in his manner," she added slowly, upon second-thought.

But there was nothing at all particular in his manner when he appeared, unless it was the absence of all interest in Claudia. He did, indeed, ask if she were well, and hoped they should see her on the ice, in a coldly polite tone which struck a chill to the girl's heart even through the door, against which she had placed her ear.

Why did not Kitty reply? Why did she not call her? she thought, with a burst of tears, throwing herself upon the bed. But Miss Laud had no opportunity

to reply. He had taken her skates from her hand with a "by your leave," and hastened her away, for all the world, as Miss Laud said to herself, as though he dreaded Claudia to appear.

But Miss Bryce did not spend the afternoon in tears. There was still a shred of hope left to her.

"Be sure that you ask him to come in when you return," she had said to her friend. "You may invite him to tea if you choose."

It was only the night before that he had drunk tea with them; but his visits had once been almost daily, and why should they not be so again? He had asked to come as he used to do. She wiped away her tears, arranged her dress, and was behind the shabby little window, watching for their return, before the afternoon had half passed away. It was almost dark when they appeared, Captain Elyot swinging Miss Laud's skates and his own, and the latter looking up into his face, as they came on over the snow in the gray light, in a saucy, bewitching way not pleasant for another woman to see, if that other woman chanced to feel a personal interest in the smiles of the young man.

They stood a moment, these two, at the door; but Miss Bryce had retreated from the window. She did not feel that she could compose her countenance to meet Captain Elyot's eye. She listened to their voices, however; for their conversation was prolonged for some time after they had gained the door. A very gay time Kitty was having, and without a thought of her! Claudia could hardly keep back the tears of vexation while she hearkened every moment for the door to open. It did open after a time,—a long time it seemed to her; but she could distinctly hear the retreating

step of the young man. So he was not coming in, after all! And with the pang of disappointment, sharp as the stab of a knife, her friend entered, happy and most inappropriately gay and rosy.

"Claudia, I wish you had come out: we have had a delightful time."

"So I should judge, from the sound of your voice at the door," Claudia replied stiffly. "I only hope you have not caught cold standing so long outside."

And Miss Bryce bent over the work in her hand as though life were too short for its completion.

"Don't be cross, dear;" and Miss Laud laid her rosy face against Claudia's pale cheek. "How could I help enjoying myself? Everybody was out, — and asked for you," she added quickly. Miss Bryce moved her face away. "And indeed I did invite him in; but he refused. He had promised to meet some one. It was about some affairs at the mess-room I don't understand; but I heard him make the engagement with Captain Luttrell on the ice. So you see, dear, it was no flimsy pretext to get off. But why were you not at the window? I kept him a moment, thinking you would appear."

"How could I stand in the window, as though I were watching for you and him?" Claudia said, relenting a little.

She hesitated, blushing faintly.

"And did he say any thing, Kitty? Did he ask if I were coming out?"

"He asked that before we left the house," Miss Laud replied.

But there was little comfort in this assurance, since Claudia had overheard the inquiry.

"And there really was no opportunity," Miss Laud went on hastily as she disrobed. "We were never alone a moment."

"But there was the walk home. I am sure you came on slowly enough to have talked over every thing."

So Claudia had been at the window!

"Yes; and he gave me a most amusing account of a skating experience" —

But Miss Bryce did not desire its recapitulation at this moment.

"I know, — with the Slades," she said. "I was there myself."

But she did not so much as smile at the remembrance: she could hardly have patience with the levity of her friend. It was so exaggerated as to seem almost as though it were assumed. There must be something more, something held back.

"And was the sutler's daughter out to-day?"

"No; but she sat in the window as we passed just now, Claudia; and she has the sweetest face" —

"Did he see her?"

Claudia forgot her work for a moment.

"To be sure, he did, my dear, having the use of his eyes! He took off his hat as though she had been a duchess. I really can't make him out. But I managed to refer to his visit here last evening, before he left me."

It was coming at last. This was what Claudia had waited for. She worked away steadily; but her face betrayed her, while Miss Laud ran on as she took off her wraps, —

"'I'm afraid you found our game last night rather slow,' said I. 'Rumor credits you gentlemen with play-

ing so high, that a quiet hand at whist with a couple of bunglers like Claudia and me must be stupid enough.'

"'Rumor is a liar,' he answered quite savagely (the young man is certainly not devoid of spirit). 'I can at least deny the story for myself.'

"'Then, you didn't find it utterly dull? We were afraid you might,' said I.

"'By no means,' he replied emphatically. 'I never passed an evening farther removed from dullness.'"

"Did he, Kitty? Did he really say that?"

"'Then, perhaps you will repeat it,' said I. 'I'll promise you a better partner another time.'"

Claudia waited eagerly for what was to come. But here Miss Laud's memory failed her.

"He thanked me, I know, and added something of having spent many pleasant evenings here."

"But did he say he should come again? You must remember, Kitty, if you think a moment."

"I can't say; I really don't know; and yet the impression I received was that he would come."

And with this Claudia was obliged to content herself.

But days passed on, and he did not appear, as was said at the beginning of the chapter. A heavy rain set in, flooding the ice, and rendering all out-of-door recreation impossible. Even visiting was for a time out of the question; and Miss Laud yawned and sighed over the dreary prospect from the window, and wished herself back in the States again.

Claudia watched and fretted in secret. Why did he not come? Others of the officers dropped in, in spite of the storm. Men for whom she cared nothing braved

wind and flood to reach them. He only staid away. Sometimes she doubted her friend. Was Kitty deceiving her? She appeared true, and ready with sympathy; but to Claudia's sick fancy every face was double.

It was more than a week before the rain ceased, and the heaviness hanging over the little company at the fort rolled away with the clouds. If the cold would but strengthen now, the skating would be finer than ever.

Miss Bryce, entering the parlor suddenly one afternoon, discovered her friend consulting the thermometer. At Claudia's appearance Miss Laud reddened.

"It is growing colder," she said, with evident embarrassment, walking away from the window.

The cold increased throughout the night. By the second day the ice was pronounced safe, and every one prepared to enjoy it after the enforced rest. In default of a more desirable attendant, Claudia had accepted Lieutenant Gibbs as an escort.

"But I cannot think of leaving you alone all the afternoon," she said as she settled her hat in its place. "I'll only go out for half an hour. I thought Captain Welles asked you last night. Why didn't you accept? so fond of skating as you are, too. I could not understand your refusal."

Miss Laud's back was turned to her friend. She did not reply at once.

"I refused him," she said presently, without turning her head, "because — I am expecting Captain Elyot to come for me, Claudia."

"What do you mean? When did you see him to make such an appointment?"

Claudia's voice was sharp, and near to breaking. But now Miss Laud faced her friend.

"Not since we went skating together, more than a week ago. You may believe me, Claudia, I have never seen him since. But he engaged to take me out again the first fine day. You remember it looked like a storm that night."

"And you knew it all the time, and kept it back! I would never have thought it of you, Kitty. I would never have believed you to be so sly."

There was a sudden quaver in Claudia's voice, and she burst into tears.

"I don't know why you should call me sly," Miss Laud said, with some spirit. "I would have told you that night, but I knew you would be angry. You were vexed as it was, because I didn't bring him in. I asked him: what could I do more? And it's little enough attention I have received from your friends. You need not begrudge me this, Claudia. I may as well confess that it isn't at all as I supposed it would be, or what you led me to expect from your letters. And my new dresses not so much as taken out of my trunks! I might" —

But there came a resounding rap at the door; and Jinny's head was thrust into the room, putting an end to Miss Laud's words, as well as checking Claudia's tears. Lieutenant Gibbs was in the parlor.

"You will never go out. Your eyes are frightfully red," said Miss Laud in a more composed tone.

The walls were thin: what might he not have overheard.

But Claudia disdained reply. She bathed her eyes, and smoothed her hair (ruffled by the pillows, where she had taken refuge), re-adjusted her hat, and went. At last she began to feel something of a roused spirit. She

had no one to depend upon but herself. She saw clearly now that she must gather her strength, and fight as best she could single-handed. What were red eyes in such an emergency!

When Captain Elyot called for Miss Laud (a duty he had nearly forgotten), he found her equipped, and awaiting him. He had been entrapped into asking her again, — if one can be said to be caught who walks open-eyed into the snare. Her brusque, odd ways amused him. Her saucy speech could not wound: it could sting, indeed; but as a boy he had learned to grasp a nettle boldly. She still persisted in bringing up Blossom's name; but, forewarned now, he made brief reply, or none at all, to her suggestions and innuendoes.

The river was crowded with skaters. Even Mrs. Bryce had been tempted to try her clumsy skill; and Lieutenant Orme was happy in having Blossom under his care. Mrs. Stubbs had been cajoled into an unwilling consent at last.

Claudia and her attendant were already upon the ice when Miss Laud and Captain Elyot reached it, — not the angry, tearful Claudia of an hour before, but Miss Bryce at her best, well-dressed, graceful, almost handsome, and the observed of all.

"A charming day, certainly," she replied to Captain Elyot's polite greeting, uttering the words with a smile.

They were almost like the smile and the words she had bestowed upon him months before, — perhaps not exactly the same, but at least equal to a photograph of the original. For the amount of will and energy which the weakest woman will develop to hide her heart is beyond wonder and praise. It is not deceit. It is a natural growth, like porcupine-quills, and intended for

the same purpose of defence. Captain Elyot, who remembered uncomfortably the manner in which he had parted from Miss Bryce at her own door, and had avoided her since, was set at ease at last. His vanity had deceived him, he thought to himself: the whole unpleasant evening had been but an echo of his spirit, which was out of tune. Claudia's old charming manner had returned, and he wished Gibbs success with all his heart. Indeed, he was a good deal befogged at this time, and hardly knew head-lands from clouds. But the four formed a small circle for a moment; and nothing could be more amiable, or even affectionate, than the manner of the two young ladies. He little imagined that they had mentally vowed never to speak to each other again less than sixty minutes before, and that he had been the occasion of the quarrel!

He devoted himself to Miss Laud, as in politeness bound; but his eyes would sometimes follow a slight figure in a fur-lined jacket shooting past, with Lieutenant Orme's long legs beside it. Other parties were dashing by with alarming velocity. Each time Blossom and her companion seemed to increase their speed. It was reckless and unsafe: the careless boy was not to be trusted with such a charge, he thought, replying absently to his companion, and tempted to interfere at the risk of angering the lieutenant. While he hesitated, the calamity he had foreseen took place. There was an exclamation like a cry. The crowd pressed forward to one spot.

"Stand back! Stand back!" shouted an authoritative voice. "Don't you see that the ice is cracking under your weight!"

It was the major, who had just arrived.

The circle widened suddenly, and broke. As it parted, Elyot saw a little motionless form, a dark heap, about which the others had gathered. There had been a collision between the mad racers, and Blossom had gone down. Before any one could raise her, he had dashed into the circle, lifted her in his arms, and was skating toward the shore, ignoring Lieutenant Orme, who, upon his knees beside her, was tugging wildly at the straps of his skates. The boy followed him as speedily as possible, as did most of the company; for she lay like one dead in the young man's arms. The afternoon's sport was at an end.

"Will you oblige me by apologizing to Miss Laud, and taking her home," Captain Elyot said coldly to the young lieutenant, who came up as the former was having his skates removed.

The poor lieutenant, terrified and repentant, went off without a word to do his bidding, while Captain Elyot carried Blossom to her mother. Any one of the women who had regarded her so superciliously a moment before would have gladly done something for the poor girl now. Some one offered to run on and prepare Mrs. Stubbs. But the dash over the ice had begun to revive her already; and, by the time she was laid upon the fine sofa in her own parlor, Blossom had opened her eyes. Half the company who had witnessed this accident had crowded into the room, or hung about the open door.

"What is it?" Blossom cried in an excited tone, waking to find all these strange faces about her.

"Nothing at all, child. Don't you be fretted," said her mother, with a strange quaver in her voice.

"You fell on the ice. They came to see if you were hurt," Captain Elyot explained.

"That was kind," said the child, with a sweet, faint smile. Forgiving her enemies with the words, though quite unconscious that she had any, and too weak to try to understand why the tears came to the eyes of the chaplain's wife, or why the showy young lady who had pressed forward to Captain Elyot's side should turn away her head.

"Let me stay with you, Mrs. Stubbs," said Mrs. Brown, the chaplain's wife. "I can sit by her if you are called away."

"Thank you, ma'am ; but I reckon I can do all that is necessary," Mrs. Stubbs replied in a hard tone.

The grace of forgiveness was not hers, and she remembered that this woman had slighted Blossom. They stole away one after another. The major, even, had pressed into the room to see how it fared with the child, though neither Mrs. Bryce nor Claudia had followed.

"You'll be quite well in the morning," he said kindly, patting her brown curls.

"I am quite well now," Blossom replied. "I think I could sit up."

But Mrs. Stubbs gathered her in her strong arms, and bore her off to her bed.

CHAPTER XIII.

“THO’ FATHER AN’ MITHER AN’ A’ SHOULD GAE
MAD.”

EARLY in the evening Lieutenant Orme crept around to the store. He looked with longing eyes toward the parlor-door; but it was not to open for him.

“How is Miss Blossom?” he ventured to ask of Mrs. Stubbs, who stood like a grim image of justice behind the scales.

Thank God! she was not dead, or even desperately ill, or her mother would not be here.

“Blossom?” repeated Mrs. Stubbs in an unpleasant voice. “She’s but poorly, sir.” And she poured out the coffee she had been weighing.

A chill ran through all his bones.

“It was my fault, I know; but you see” —

The boy would have attempted to excuse himself to her, though no excuse would have set him right in his own eyes; but Mrs. Stubbs, tying up the package, and giving it into the hands of the purchaser, paid no further attention to him.

“Is there nothing more? Thank you,” as she handed back the change; for the sutler’s wife was ceremoniously polite within the bounds of her affairs at the store.

"Could I do any thing?" asked the lieutenant in an awed voice, pressing into notice again.

What if she were to die, after all!

"Nothing that I think of now," Mrs. Stubbs replied coldly, moving off, and intrenching herself behind a great ledger, which gave her the appearance of having stepped around a corner, and effectually ended the conference.

The boy stole away, heavy-hearted and full of forebodings. If she were to die! He sat down upon the steps outside for a moment: he was too miserable to go back to his quarters. Even Captain Elyot had blamed him: he felt it, though they had not met since they parted on the ice. And did Blossom also reproach him? Or (and he grew sick at heart over the vision his fancy called up) did she lie still and white, with no thought of him at all, too ill for recollection? He could not bear the suspense, or the weight of his fears. He would seek Captain Elyot, and beg of him to go and face Mrs. Stubbs, and learn the truth, even if by so doing he received the full measure of his friend's anger for his carelessness.

A half an hour later, Captain Elyot strolled into the store.

"And how is Miss Blossom now?" he inquired cheerfully. "None the worse for her fall, I hope."

"You may just step in an' see for yourself, Cap'n Elyot. She's a bit weak an' trembly yet; but you'll find her in the parlor. She would be brought out. She declared she could walk; but 'Not a foot do you put to the floor this night,' said I. The surgeon says there are no bones broke; but he's a fool at the best, as every one knows. It is I that deserve a broken back,

for being talked into trusting her to that rattle-headed" —

"Don't be hard on Orme. The boy is frightened enough at what has happened. He'll be more careful another time; and, really, it was not entirely his fault. I saw it all, and" —

"Them can risk their lives as choose; but it'll be neither me nor mine," said Mrs. Stubbs in a tone beyond gainsaying.

She shut up her book, with the air of having the lieutenant's head between the covers, and descended from her high seat.

"But you may go on, Cap'n Elyot: I'll follow you presently."

And she proceeded to make every thing tidy and fast for the night, while the captain, after a tap, and a pause at the parlor-door, passed on into the room where he was to find Blossom. A pale, soft light shone through it from a great lamp on the table beside the sofa; and just rising from the sofa, in some kind of a loose white gown, was Blossom herself. Was it the pale yellow light, or the gown, that made her so white?

"Don't let me disturb you: I am sure you had better lie down," Captain Elyot said, tossing his hat upon the floor, and drawing a chair close to her side. "I have come from Lieutenant Orme, which must excuse a rather late call. The poor fellow dared not come himself. I left him tearing his hair over his carelessness."

"Oh! he need not do that," Blossom said quickly. "It was my own fault; and, indeed, there is no harm done. I shall be up to-morrow."

"He heard a most alarming account of you at the store."

"I suppose he didn't see mother."

And Captain Elyot could not contradict her. There fell a moment's silence between the two, with the hush which comes at nightfall, — a hush of the spirit as well as of all confused and laborious sounds which fill the working-hours.

Blossom lay back in one corner of the flowered sofa, her cheek against its arm, one hand, with its pink-tipped fingers, just showing below the loose sleeve of her gown as it lay on her knee. How frail and sweet to look at she was this night! It came to him like a revelation, that life would hold nothing beautiful or dear to him if those eyes, languidly open now, should close forever, — what would it be to him if they had never opened again! He bent, with a sudden impulse, and kissed her hand.

"You gave me an awful fright," he said in a hoarse voice, and with the beating of his heart sounding in his ears.

There was a hand on the door. It opened, and Mrs. Stubbs appeared. Captain Elyot had risen to his feet. His color was heightened; but he stood erect and unabashed.

"Are you going, Cap'n Elyot?" Mrs. Stubbs asked, suspecting nothing.

"Yes. Miss Blossom is tired. I shall look in in the morning;" and he began to search about for his hat. "I am glad to have so good a report to carry back to Orme. The poor boy is inclined to take more blame than fairly belongs to him."

"Tell him I am not hurt at all. He must come and see me to-morrow," said Blossom faintly from the sofa.

"You must not be tiring yourself with too many visitors," Mrs. Stubbs interposed.

Evidently the lieutenant was in disgrace with the sutler's widow.

"For one little moment," pleaded Blossom.

But her mother made no reply. She was stirring the fire noisily, and setting the room in order. All the peaceful stillness which had hung over the place a moment before now flew up the chimney and away. It was not a paradise any longer, in which, as the young man had thought, one could linger forever. The bustle of every-day life had come back. It was only when he looked at Blossom, pale and sweet and languid in her white gown, with her cheek pressing the flaring roses, that the dream remained.

He had no excuse to linger; but he could not go without a word from her. Would she be angry with him for his presumption? Dear child! would she know that it was presuming? Somebody ought to take care of her. Oh! if—

"At least I may tell the lieutenant you forgive him?" he said interrogatively, addressing Blossom, and stepping directly before the gaudy sofa.

"There is nothing to forgive," she answered in a low voice, while the color flew over her cheeks.

She did not lift her eyes, or put out her hand when he bade her good-night. And had she forgiven him also? He could not tell, he said to himself. He would see her in the morning. And he found himself humming a gay song—he who had no voice for singing—as he strode across the parade-ground to his quarters, where Orme was waiting for him.

It had been a long half-hour to the boy, whose face was fairly haggard with dread.

"Will she die?" he asked in a husky voice.

"Halloo, Orme! not tired of waiting? Have a pipe, man. Why didn't you help yourself? Die? Who could have told you such a story? Why, if you had seen her just now" —

"And why didn't I see her? It was the old woman who made me believe I had nearly killed her."

The young lieutenant's voice broke. The strain of anxiety had made him as weak as a girl.

"But I understand it all," he went on. "I've seen it coming for a long while. She's only too glad of an excuse to shut the door against me. They say the truth when they declare she don't want me there, but that you" —

"What is that?"

The blood flew into Captain Elyot's face: the stem of the pipe snapped between his teeth. Had the gossip of the garrison fastened on him?

"What do they say?" he repeated. "I'll take it all, Orme."

"I talk like a fool; but it's true all the same," Lieutenant Orme replied. "They say the old woman would rather see you with her daughter than me. That's the whole of it, Elyot, on my honor. Gossip, you know, but the Lord's truth. Of course she'd rather you went there than I; and so would Blossom. That's the worst of it," the boy added, with a choke in his voice, dropping his face into his hands.

"You don't mean to say, boy" —

Captain Elyot's voice was hoarse. He wheeled suddenly round in his chair, tossed his pipe into the fire, and regarded his friend.

"How could I help it?" said the lieutenant. "Such a dear little girl, and seeing her day after day! I've been there no end of times when you didn't know it."

"Yes, I suppose so."

"And she always seemed glad to see me, and all that, you know, till sometimes I've thought" —

"Yes, yes," Captain Elyot said brusquely.

Had he not been going through this same course of reasoning to-night?

"But have you said any thing of this to her? You haven't been turning her head, Orme?"

"What do you mean? I'd ask her to marry me to-morrow if I dared. But it's no use."

And the lieutenant fell back into despair again.

"I tell you, Elyot, it—it would be different if it were you," blurted out the boy, with something very like a sob.

"Speak of yourself, man," said Captain Elyot coldly. "And that's not the way to be talking about any woman. Consider your own chances. Beyond that, it's no concern of yours."

"But I am thinking of myself," persisted the lieutenant. "Of course I know it is nothing to you, and I wouldn't have said that to any one else. But you have stood by me like — like a trump, ever since we came over the plains together, and I couldn't keep any thing in my heart from you."

"Don't gush," Captain Elyot said shortly. "What can I do for you, boy?"

"You might help me, if you would, since it is nothing to you. Now, if *you*" —

"Please to consider yourself. I might help you, and so I will; any thing in the world."

He had succeeded in making his voice almost hearty and free.

"If you'd — stay away."

"What?"

"If you would stay away till I could try my chance."

"Yes, to be sure," Captain Elyot answered quietly, hardly knowing what he was saying.

"Not entirely, of course. You'll have to take me round there at first; for Mrs. Stubbs will never let me into the house until she has forgotten this. Even when I have made my peace with her, you must show yourself occasionally, just to keep her in good-humor; not staying long at a time, or saying too much to Miss Blossom."

"No, oh, no!" Then, "I suppose you have considered this matter on every side?"

"I can't think of any thing else."

"As far as it concerns your own happiness. But have you given a thought to how this fancy—I beg your pardon—this—this choice may strike—your father and mother?"

All the vague doubts as to the wisdom of a connection with the Stubbs family took shape, and crowded upon Captain Elyot's mind now. He remembered old Colonel Orme, the lieutenant's father, whom, with his elegant wife, he had met a year or two before. How would they look upon Blossom, and, above all, upon Mrs. Stubbs? Surely it was his duty, if not to warn the lieutenant, at least to set this matter before him. It was possibly one of those times when duty is an unconscious satisfaction.

"They might stand out at first; but they'd come round."

Young Orme's doubts had faded when thrust into the light.

"She is so sweet, who could resist her?"

"Who, indeed!" thought Captain Elyot, forgetting to respond aloud, and aware of nothing but that he was being galloped over rough-shod by this heedless boy.

"But the old woman? There's the rub!"

And the lieutenant thrust both hands into what would have been a mass of light curls but for a very close cut of the day before, as he stared with scowling brow at the rough deal table on which his elbows rested.

"I suppose one couldn't kill her! Fancy my mother taking up Mrs. Stubbs! But don't distress yourself, old fellow. Perhaps we could pension her off. There'd be some way to arrange all that. There always is."

And, with this cheerful young philosophy, the conference ended, as Captain Elyot announced his intention of retiring. Without some reminder of the lateness of the hour, Lieutenant Orme would have gone on till morning, singing Blossom's praises, and balancing his chances. His hopes grew with the sound of his own voice; and he went off at last entirely assured and happy.

"You shall be best man!" he exclaimed, thrusting his head in at the door, when he had apparently taken himself away. "And see here, Elyot," appearing again, "I shall expect you to make it all right with the colonel."

"Get to bed, will you?" roared Captain Elyot at this second interruption. "And mind, boy, I positively decline dwelling upon this subject more than twelve hours out of the twenty-four, vitally interesting though it is. And now off with you!"

And he closed the door, and turned the key in the lock.

He had the room to himself; but still he was in no haste to retire. He paced back and forth, smoking one pipe after another, until long after every sound about him was stilled. Once, in passing his open desk, a sealed letter, lying with face upturned, caught his eye. It was the one he had written and never sent to his uncle Jeremy. He tore it up deliberately before he resumed his march. He was in no mood to-night to bind himself with chains of this old man's wedding, though what did it matter what became of him now? The morning, pale and gray-clad, peered into his room before, tired out at last, he went to bed.

He acceded to all his friend had proposed. He took him around to Mrs. Stubbs's domicile, and assisted him to make his peace with that exacting female. Then he staid away faithfully for a fortnight. Even when his visits were resumed, they were at intervals growing longer as the weeks went by. He held firmly to his promise, as a soldier and man of honor should do, he said to himself, when the light from Blossom's window tempted him in passing the house. The brightness seemed to have dropped out of his life at this time. It was like an illuminated picture with the sun left out. But he kept faithfully to his promise. He was haunted by Blossom's face as he had seen it the night after her fall on the ice, lying against the thornless roses, with its half-shut eyes, its drooping mouth, like those of a tired child. And again he thrilled at the thought of the trembling hand he had kissed. She had made no effort to draw it away. She had flushed rosy red. Could he have mistaken the meaning of it all? She was a child, innocent, ignorant of herself, but with the heart of a woman. And had her heart not responded to his in that one

instant? He asked himself this again and again, more frequently, perhaps, than was quite consistent with the fealty he had sworn to his friend; for he had vowed within himself that he would put all thought of Blossom out of his mind. But the thought of those we love is like ghosts and spirits: bolts nor bars avail against them. And though he saw the girl but seldom now, and rarely without the lieutenant by his side to divide with him her smiles and blushes, the shadow of her innocent self never left him.

The lieutenant, in the mean while, vibrated between assurance and despair, and, like a sieve, could hold neither hopes nor fears. Reduced to infinitesimal tormenting particulars by this filtering, his visits to the Stubbses, — which he had managed to make almost daily again, — Blossom's friendly greeting, her timid ways, her growing charms, were all spread out by the boy before his friend. To listen was like rubbing an inflamed wound; and yet Captain Elyot could not turn his ear away. Unconsciously, while he argued aloud for his friend, or mechanically concurred in the lieutenant's hopes, he was arguing mentally in his own favor, and feeding little by little the flame he honestly intended to extinguish. At times he was tempted to throw up his commission, return to the States, and even submit himself to uncle Jeremy's wishes. But the last was only the indifference of despair; and this state was never of long continuance. More often, the increasing fascination of Blossom's vicinity, even though he saw her so seldom now, held him to the fort.

The winter was wearing away. There had been no excitement of action, and but little social gayety, to make the long, dull days, or still duller evenings, pass

more swiftly; and discontent, or indifference to every thing, — except the card-table, which still held its votaries, — was slowly creeping into the garrison, when news came that disturbances had broken out down in the Washita country, with a report that troops were to be sent at once from Fort Atchison to join General Johnston there.

Languor and discontent vanished like a puff of smoke. Any thing was better than the mole-life they had been leading for the past three months. Even death is a cup men drink greedily enough, with a froth of excitement on the top. And not an officer at the post — unless among the married men, with whom family considerations weighed heavily — but hoped he might be ordered to join the expedition.

The choice fell upon two, — Captain Luttrell, whose long service, and good judgment in military affairs, made him a competent leader, and Lieutenant Orme.

“It’s the best chance that could fall to me,” said the boy, rushing in upon Captain Elyot to announce the news, and talk it over. “If I dawdled the whole winter away here, I should be good for nothing by spring; and I want to be a soldier first of all,” he added, straightening his boyish form, while a faint blush of shy pride showed for a moment on his cheek.

“That’s right, old fellow!” said Captain Elyot, laying an affectionate hand upon the young man’s shoulder.

Then they were silent. Each knew of whom the other was thinking. But something choked the boy; and Captain Elyot could not bring himself to utter Blossom’s name. He was ashamed to feel that his heart had leaped in him when he found that his friend was to go, that the way would be open for him now, if he

chose to walk in it. He fought it out with himself in that brief moment while the lieutenant was declaring his ambition. He put self under his feet with a struggle: the boy should have his chance.

"But all the same," he went on, "if you prefer to stay, I fancy I have a little influence at headquarters, and could persuade the major to let me go in your place. I'm rather rusty with lying by so long," he said carelessly.

"Yes, I thought of that," the boy replied coolly. "I knew you would; and I don't mind telling you that I was tempted at first to stay."

A bright blush glowed all over the young face as he went on: —

"But you see, Elyot, I'd better go. I've thought sometimes that she looked on me as a boy; and I want to show her that I'm not afraid of any of it," he burst out; and, throwing himself down into a chair, he covered his face, and sobbed like a girl.

"What must you think of me?" he said after a moment.

"I think too well of you to want you sent off on a winter campaign like this," Captain Elyot replied under his breath.

He was more moved by the boy's reliance upon him, and the confidence he felt himself but half to deserve, than he chose to show.

"You'd better let me try for your place," he said aloud. "Nobody would be the wiser; and I'm used to it. It would only be play to me," though he knew full well that the only play would be cold and fighting, and perhaps death. "Come, say the word, and I'll go up to headquarters at once."

But the lieutenant refused.

"I should feel like a coward. Besides, I've been waiting for something like this. I could speak to her, perhaps, if I knew I were going away. Suppose we go down there now? She can't have heard it so soon. I believe I would like to tell her myself."

"Then you don't want me?" said Captain Elyot hastily, pleading an engagement, and hurrying away from his friend.

He believed that the lieutenant was about to try his fate, and he could not sit quietly and wait to know the result. He started off upon a solitary walk, conscious that renunciation leaves a bitter taste in the mouth. He had done his duty; he had behaved as a man of honor should do: but he was neither glad, nor at peace with himself.

But the lieutenant had no intention of declaring his feelings to Blossom at once, unless some particularly fortunate chance should occur. He would tell her, first, that he was to go away, and watch the effect of these tidings upon her. He had read of girls who trembled and turned pale when their lovers were sent into danger and possible death. Would she thus unconsciously reveal her tender interest in him? If she did, he would tell her all, and assure her that he should hold his life as something precious indeed, since she valued it.

He burned with excitement as he hastened toward the sutler's quarters, while he planned all this scene in his mind, giving to it the happiest termination. It was too wonderful to be true. And yet it had been realized for others: might it not be for him?

But Blossom did not tremble, nor did the pretty color leave her face. She had heard the news before he reached her, and opened the subject herself.

“So you are going away,” she said, “and down into that dreadful country where the Indians are murdering the women and children!”

She did shudder as she spoke, and her face may have paled; for there came to her a recollection, vivid and piercing, of that one time of horror in her own life not many months past. This was not the emotion Orme had hoped for. It had little to do with himself, the lieutenant felt; and his heart suddenly dragged like an anchor wrenched from its hold. But despair catches at straws. Might it not have been different if she had been alone? There sat Mrs. Stubbs, prim, black, and silent, with some stiff, ugly knitting in her hand, casting a shadow over the whole bright room lying open to the winter sunlight.

“I hope you’ll think of us sometimes, Miss Blossom,” said Orme, twirling his cap, and forgetting all the fine things he hoped to say.

In spite of his efforts at self-command, the tears would rush into his eyes. Blossom did not see them. He could not have borne that humiliation. But she was struck by the dejected air of her friend, and was truly distressed over his departure.

“I shall think of you a great many times; every day, and—and more,” she replied. “Indeed, I shall miss you more than I can say.”

And there was a catch in the voice which suddenly ceased. It may be that a scene would have ensued but for Mrs. Stubbs’s presence, though hardly of so tender a nature as the boy had pictured to himself. As it was, Mrs. Stubbs thought it time to interfere. She had not left the store, and donned a clean apron at this hour of the day, to have this young man make love to her daughter before her eyes.

"You'll soon be coming back," she broke in, warming wonderfully, to all appearance, toward the young man, and speaking in a cheery voice, for which Blossom blessed her in her heart. All her hopeful words of encouragement were drowned in a sea of tears, welling behind her eyes at the moment.

"It won't be long before you an' Blossom'll be singing your pretty songs again, I'll warrant ye."

"But not with my leave or consent," she added to herself. There had been folly enough already, she thought, watching the boy's changing countenance, which any one might read. She blessed her stars that she had left her work, and taken up her position in the parlor, anticipating some such visit as this. It had been inconvenient, and at the time seemed almost impossible. Officers of distinction from other posts were here on their way south. They were to leave with the detachment from Fort Atchison early the next morning; and the ladies, perhaps to banish dismal thoughts, had planned a ball for this night. The band were blowing themselves faint in preparation for so unusual an event. The store had been ransacked, and Mrs. Stubbs driven wild by the impossible demands upon her. And, in the midst of it all, she had taken up her position in her own parlor as though she had nothing to do but complete the endless round of the ugly blue stocking in her hand.

At this moment a summons came to her from the store.

"Well, good luck t'ye, and you must tell us all about it when you come back," she said with a cheerful air of dismissal, rolling up her work, and waiting for the young man to take his leave.

And was it to end like this? Was he not to see Blossom again? The woman's rough, cheerful parting words went on in his ears, and still he did not rise, or offer to make reply. He was struck dumb and motionless. It had all proved so different from his dream! At last, by an effort, he got upon his feet. Some suspicion of Mrs. Stubbs's scheming had struggled in upon his mind, and gave him strength. "But I shall see you again before we set off." Then, like a ray of light out of the darkness, a thought crossed his mind. "I shall see you to-night," he said hastily. "Surely, Miss Blossom, you will be at the ball?"

Blossom looked to her mother, her face flushed and glowing with sudden heat. Oh if she could! if it were possible that this unknown delight were in store for her! The boy did not notice how soon she had forgotten his going away. He was intent only upon his hope of seeing her once more, of having an opportunity to whisper one tender word in her ear.

Mrs. Stubbs hesitated. But why should she deny the child the sight, the like of which would not occur again for a long time? And yet she shrank from putting herself forward, from thrusting herself into a company where she knew she would be unwelcome. Still, if she refused, might not this boy haunt the house, and even obtain entrance in her absence? There was safety in a crowd. And then Captain Elyot would be there. He had absented himself of late, in a way that both puzzled and annoyed the woman. Were her schemes to be foiled, after all?

"Blossom could not go alone," she began, revolving the matter in her mind.

"If I might" — suggested the lieutenant eagerly.

But he checked himself; for he saw that he had made a mistake. "Come yourself, Mrs. Stubbs," he said as cordially as he could, considering that he did not in the least desire her presence. "You'll enjoy looking on. Everybody is to be there."

"We might look in for a while," the woman said doubtfully.

"*Do*, Mrs. Stubbs! Mind that you come now: I'll be on the watch for you. And I won't say good-by, or take any of your good wishes, since we are to meet again." And the lieutenant went off in high spirits to report his success to his friend, sure, from the remembrance of Blossom's glowing face as he turned away from the door, that it needed but one undisturbed moment by her side to make him entirely happy.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BALL.

THE festivities were well under way before Mrs. Stubbs and Blossom approached the ball-room. The woman could fight, both for her daughter and herself, valiantly and victoriously, upon her own ground; but to appear here was like carrying the war into Africa. To put one's self deliberately into an unwelcome position can never be agreeable, even to the most calloused feelings; and Mrs. Stubbs's sensibilities had become more and more acute each day as she fancied herself brow-beaten and "put upon," as she expressed it to herself. She was rich, *rich*: day and night this rang in her inner ears like a call to worship; yet no one came to bow down before her. She was astonished at the extent of her wealth. Stubbs had been a careful man, a man not given to boasting even in the presence of his own wife; and, though she knew that each visit to the States augmented the store laid by there against future need, she did not dream of its having reached the sum she found it to be when death revealed all of Stubbs's secrets. It seemed limitless to her as she fingered notes and bonds and deeds. She regarded herself with awe as the possessor of all this wealth. Why did not others give her

the reverence she bestowed upon herself? And what was it that held her back from taking her place with the best of them? Was it the store? A few weeks, or months at most, would put that out of her hands. But even this thought failed to assure her. Strive as she might, she could never be like the others: this she knew deep down in her heart. Theirs had been a life of ease and of gentle associations, while hers had been one of hardship and work and rough ways. Each had left an ineffaceable mark: even gold would not rub it out. But the child — and then she came back to Blossom, who was the Rome to which all the roads of her fancy led. Blossom would yet be a lady: it might be when she was dead and out of the way; and death sometimes seemed a boon to the woman.

They were in the dressing-room; and Mrs. Stubbs was laying aside her coarse, heavy shawl, as these thoughts flew through her mind: there was their nest indeed, to which they constantly returned; there they multiplied and brooded, and filled her with dark fancies, like uneasy wings. There was a cold sensation about her heart as she smoothed down her hair. How they would stare at her, and wonder why she had come here!

“We’ll not be long: you’ll soon see enough of it,” she said to Blossom, pulling out the sombre folds of her stiff black gown, and trying to hide the nervousness which nearly overcame her. She had regarded appearances so far as to assume her best gown; but this was the only concession she had made to the occasion. Her hard, bony hands were uncovered; her dark hair, streaked with gray, was brushed plainly down on either side the face fast losing its comeliness. No fold of

crape, or shred of softening lace, concealed it. There had been no attempt to make herself fine.

The bewitching sound of horns and bugles, with the patter of feet, and the slide of silk over the floor, came out to meet them through the open door.

“Oh, how beautiful it is!” cried happy Blossom, peeping in. She neither hoped nor feared any thing. She was only wild with excitement over the little glimpse of glory she had caught through the open door. Never for a moment did she dream of the faintness at the heart of the woman who waited in silence for her to slip out of her cloak, and shake out her pretty white gown. She had worn it last — caught here and there with roses — at some school festival in the East. The roses had been replaced by knots of velvet, though one white bud was caught now in her curls. But her cheeks were roses (blush-roses), and her eyes were gems; and she needed nothing more for adornment, when she had thrown a little white cloak over her pretty bare shoulders, and followed her mother into fairyland.

And a very prosaic fairyland it was to one without the glamour of youth over his eyes, — ornamented with strips of bunting and of light-colored cambric, every yard of which had passed through Mrs. Stubbs’s own hands. Somewhat cold too. Blossom drew the cloak closer about her throat as she looked around her with innocent, eager eyes. The trumpets shrieked, the cymbals clashed, and the drums rolled in between. They were silenced as the dance ended. The dancers dispersed to find seats, or promenade slowly up and down the long room. But it was fairyland, nevertheless, to Blossom, with its bright lights (Mrs. Stubbs’s

own candles, if the truth were told), the music beginning to rise again softly, the gay uniforms and gleaming gowns floating by. The girl had never seen anything half so dazzling before.

They could not have chosen a more fortunate moment for their entrance. They found seats near the door as the dance broke up, and for a time escaped notice. But Blossom was entirely too pretty to have this oblivion continue long. One and another of the strangers began to observe her.

"I say, Miss Bryce, who is that little girl?" asked a young captain, elegant, indolent, but curious, and one of the visitors at the post.

Claudia stared, could not believe her eyes, stared again, using her eyeglass this time.

"What impertinence!" she exclaimed aloud, forgetting her interlocutor, and turning to whisper her indignation into the ear of the friend at her side.

"Who is she, Orme?" persisted the young man, seizing the lieutenant by the arm as he hastened by, evidently in search of some one. "And see here, Orme, let me give you a word of advice," as he led him away; "don't ever be such a fool as to ask about one woman of another. You should have seen the major's daughter just now."

"Who is she?" repeated the lieutenant, whose eyes were searching the room while he only half caught the words addressed to him. "The major's daughter? Why, man, you were talking with her as I came up."

"Nonsense! Who is that pretty little thing down by the door, with the black bat beside her?"

"Why, there she is now!" exclaimed the lieutenant, as his eye followed his friend's, and lit upon Blossom;

and, twisting his arm free, he darted down the room to her.

"When did you come in? I've been looking out for you the last hour. Confounded draught from that door! Let me find you another seat. And, Miss Blossom, they're forming a quadrille, — will you accept the most awkward partner in the room? I'm awfully stupid, but think I could get you through."

"We're only looking on, Blossom and me," Mrs. Stubbs interposed in confusion, drawing back stiffly.

"But surely she might be permitted one dance," urged the lieutenant. His chances for a word with the girl were slight indeed, if her mother were to hold her by her side all the evening, after this manner.

"I—I would rather stay here," Blossom answered shyly, shrinking from a stare of over-bold admiration as Captain Luttrell swaggered by. She had longed to dance; but her courage failed when the opportunity came. "But don't let us keep you here," she went on, as Orme settled into a seat.

"Oh! I never dance when I can help it," the boy replied frankly. "Besides, we're to hang back to-night, you know, and give the other fellows a chance. And, by the way," as a sudden recollection crossed his mind, "one of them was inquiring you out a moment ago. First-rate fellow, captain in the Sixth Infantry, know all about his family—may I bring him up, Mrs. Stubbs?"

It was an exercise of self-denial on the part of the young man; and he almost hoped Mrs. Stubbs would refuse. But no, she consented at once; and he went off in search of his friend. He found him hanging upon the skirts of the major's party.

"Beg pardon for leaving you so abruptly," the lieutenant said; "but the truth is, I was looking for her myself. I'll introduce you now."

"Thanks! But believe I don't care about it," was the reply, with a shrug of the shoulders, as the young man turned away. "She's the sutler's daughter, isn't she?"

"She's the prettiest girl here, and the best of them all; and any one who says" —

"Don't excite yourself, Orme," said the other one coldly. "She's a pattern of the virtues, I don't doubt, and pretty enough, I'll admit; but the truth is, I've engaged Miss Bryce for this dance, and if you would be so obliging, my dear fellow, as to permit me to pass." For Orme, heated, and almost menacing, stood directly in his path.

The music had struck up; and the dancers, hastening to their places, jostled him on every side.

Miss Bryce, sweeping by, gave him a disapproving glance with her cool bow. She had not overheard his words; but she had marked his quarrelsome attitude and flushed face, and decided in her own mind that the lieutenant had been drinking, early in the evening though it was. It was disgraceful that the young men should do so. It had grown up from "Stubbs's," and it would be a blessing to the post if the whole pestilent family were removed. To think that the woman should actually force herself and her daughter upon them here!

Lieutenant Orme took himself out of the way of the dancers, he hardly knew how, and in a quiet corner strove to compose himself before returning to Blossom and her mother. There was no one among them all worthy to stand beside her, he thought loyally, even

though they chose to despise her. And how pretty she was! If the truth must be told, Blossom's face went a long way toward attaching her friends to her. He staid away until he began to fear they would wonder over his absence. Then he went back to them, very sore, and a good deal ashamed for his friend, with a shame which seemed to cover upon himself.

"He was engaged. I couldn't bring him," he stammered; for Mrs. Stubbs's sharp eyes seemed to pierce through him, and see into his very soul. He felt that she more than half suspected the truth; and the excuse he had prepared to offer slipped out of his mind. "It's lucky for me; that is, if you'll let me stay here." He took the vacant seat by Mrs. Stubbs's side, and tried manfully, in the occasional lulls of sound, to interest and amuse his companions. Claudia Bryce, whirling past them, threw an icy glance upon Blossom, in which was no recognition, her companion staring fixedly over the heads of the party; girls neither so young nor half so sweet of face kept time to the music, and brushed poor little Blossom's white gown. She alone of all the young ladies in the room played the part of wall-flower, — a charming wall-flower, — mignonette, sweet-pea, daf-fodil at least, but a wall-flower nevertheless.

More than one pair of admiring eyes had sought her out in this half-hour before supper; but Claudia's scorn of the girl, and indignation at her intrusion as she called it, had been evident to all; and no one of the gallants was brave enough to approach her in the very face of the major's daughter. But all these arrows of scorn, sharp though they were, glanced off the head of the unconscious girl. It was the mother who received them into her quivering heart.

The couples began to move toward the supper-room as the dance ended and the music changed. The young captain who had scorned Blossom threw a quizzical glance toward Lieutenant Orme. Would Orme lead the bat and her charge in to supper? It was a question the boy had asked of himself. He would have been only too happy to devote himself to the daughter, had she been unattended. But every chivalric emotion within him was aroused now; and he would hardly have hesitated to lead Mrs. Stubbs alone down the floor.

"They are going out to supper. We may as well follow," he said heroically, but with the most indifferent air he could assume. Already the room was half deserted. But Mrs. Stubbs refused.

"I'll have none of their supper," she said in a harsh voice, which attracted the ear of more than one passing by, and gave an unpleasant prominence to the odd party. Something of the fire that burned within her flashed out of her eyes as she settled herself in her seat with an air of defiance. She had been sharp enough to see that every one avoided them, and to know that Lieutenant Orme's friend had not cared for Blossom's acquaintance, or he would have sought her out. But she had overcome her first impulse to leave. Did they think to drive her away? She would see it out with the others. She would stay to the last, despite their sneers. But it was a passive resistance. She could hold her ground, but she shrank from advancing.

"Blossom may go if she has a mind to," she said, relenting a little. "You'll have a care over her?" she added, almost drawing back from the permission so unexpectedly granted. Might not some of these fine ladies say something to wound the child?

"Trust her to me: I'll bring her back in half an hour," said the delighted boy, leading her hurriedly away, lest Mrs. Stubbs should recall her consent. "Now give me your fan and handkerchief, and we'll have a jolly time," said he, taking possession of both. He tucked her dexterously into a corner behind Mrs. Bryce's broad back, which, as it was never once turned, made an ample and convenient shield and screen. One would have thought her the seven-headed monster, instead of a rather delicate young girl, to see the way the boy loaded her plate until the contents ran over into her lap, and even then urged more upon her.

He had lost the self-consciousness which had made him dumb in her presence when he paid his visit to her earlier in the day. Now was the time to utter the few words he had been longing to speak, and yet a most inauspicious time. How could he talk of love, of undying affection, with the rattling of plates and glasses in his ears? Men have done it, but at a fearful risk; and, with Mrs. Bryce's shoulder so dangerously near, the lieutenant dared not make the attempt. He persuaded her to take a short promenade before returning to her mother, who sat, silent and grim, and almost the only occupant of the ball-room, like the unbidden old fairy who always cast a shadow over the feasts in the fairy-stories.

The heart of the boy thumped fast and loud under his vest. It might possibly have escaped entirely, but for the many buttons which held it in. Ah! now was his opportunity. The music fell low and sweet and beguiling; the candles had burned down, until they shed a less garish light than at first; and as he led her away to a part of the room where they were

somewhat screened from Mrs. Stubbs's sharp eyes, beginning already to search for her, the boy thought it the happiest moment of his life. A joy just about to be snatched away, a pleasure ours for the moment, with the consciousness that it is as evanescent as sweet, — what can be more intoxicating? He forgot to talk to her: it was pleasure enough to feel the faint pressure of her hand upon his arm as their feet kept time to the music. He forgot that he was to go away into danger, possibly to death; or perhaps the unconscious knowledge of this made the present moment more beguiling. The room was filling again. After all, it was a brief joy. Miss Laud, hastening by to join the dance, broke the spell.

"Oh! you monopolize Lieutenant Orme. That will never do," she said with a good-natured smile, since Claudia was not by to hear.

Poor Blossom was not used to such badinage. She took it in serious earnest.

"We — we had better go back," she said, striving to draw away the hand that had rested with the weight of a rose-leaf on the boy's blue sleeve.

But he would not let it go.

"It is I who have taken possession of her," he said clumsily; "and we won't go back just yet," to Blossom, as Miss Laud passed out of hearing. "Don't mind her: she is always saying things," he added angrily.

"But I have kept you from the others."

"What do I care for the others? I had rather be with you than with any of them. I would rather be with you than with anybody else in the world," he went on hotly.

It was out at last. Not as he had intended it; but he

had spoken the words that would bring him joy or pain, he knew as soon as he had uttered them ; and he waited, with a stifled feeling at his heart, for her to reply. But she was silent now. Could it be possible that she understood, and was too shy to make response ? For an instant he was dizzy with joy. It turned his brain.

“O Blossom !” he began, ready to pour out all his love. Then he looked at her ; and the earth suddenly stood still, and the room grew dark, for she was not listening to him at all. She was following with her eyes a figure just advancing through the doorway ; and in a moment, as he recognized Captain Elyot, Orme knew that it was all over with him. He felt at this moment that he had known it from the first, and that he never had had any hope.

“Halloo, there’s Elyot,” he said quietly ; for a strange calm, like the numbness after a hurt, had fallen on him. “Suppose we go back ;” and he took her to her mother.

CHAPTER XV.

THE RESCUE.

CAPTAIN ELYOT had felt little interest in the ball. He was low-spirited over the departure of the boy, whom he had taken under his care since their ride over the plains together. In his heart he was sore and almost angry that he was not to go in Orme's place. If one were to fall, how much better that he should be that one rather than the lieutenant! Life held few charms for him just now; and there is a sweetness in self-sacrifice,—in that kind of Enoch Arden self-sacrifice, which ends in the object at last knowing all about it, and being made comfortably wretched. And so, years hence, when his bones were bleaching and crumbling on the spot where he had fallen, in place of the lieutenant, he would like the lieutenant to know the cause of it. Some such fancy as this passed through his head as he sat alone, smoking a solitary pipe on the night of the ball. The pipe went out. He threw it down in disgust. There was something like contempt of himself in his mind. For at this moment, though he was jealous and sore and wretched as he believed, he was by no means sure that he wanted to marry this girl. She was very fair to look at, and had

crept, unknown to himself, very close to his heart. But the captain was both cautious and proud, and by no means so far gone in his infatuation as not to be able to speculate upon the future of the man who should win the sutler's daughter. He must leave the army: of that there was no question. The social ostracism which would follow such a step would be unbearable to a man of spirit. And then in one of those sudden visions, vivid as reality, only more intensified, — like the concentration of a dozen realities, — Blossom's baby face, with its meek, entreating eyes, rose before him, and he forgot his prejudices, forgot his pride. He could have taken her in his arms before all the world! He threw off the delusion that made her seem present for the moment. Such fancies were not in accordance with the spirit of the promise he had made to his friend. It was not well for him to sit here, and brood alone over his unquiet thoughts. He would go out and seek society.

As he rose up from his chair, a paper at his elbow fluttered down to the floor. He had forgotten this letter, which the chaplain had put into his hand as he came from the mess-room. It was only another of uncle Jeremy's missives, which, after long wandering and delay, had found him out.

"I have heard nothing from you since your return to your regiment," the old man wrote. "Nor have you written to Mary" (which was the name of the cousin down on the Jersey shore). "There are those who would do more than this to please me; and you will find it greatly to your disadvantage if you will not do as much."

So the old man threatened him at last! He only

laughed scornfully as he threw the letter aside. This affair with uncle Jeremy, which had so annoyed him a few weeks since, had not the weight of a feather upon him now. He tossed the letter into his desk; but, before it had left his hand, he had forgotten its contents. His thoughts had sped to the ball, and he was trying to make up his mind to follow them. He had half engaged Miss Laud for the first waltz; but she would not lack partners where her sex was so sparsely represented. A strong desire to stroll down to the Stubbses for a half-hour came over him,—to look in upon this little girl, and see if she would still hold her own in his imagination. It would not be treachery toward his friend. Weeks had passed since he had been there alone. Besides, he could talk of the boy. Might he not in this way do him a service? Then he remembered the lieutenant to have said that Mrs. Stubbs had partly promised to take Blossom to the ball. He had hardly given it a thought at the time, in his eagerness to hear what more there might be to tell of the boy's visit. Would the woman do so? Would she expose the girl to the slights and sneers which he knew the well-bred ladies at the 'post were capable of bestowing? How they might hurt the child! Almost before he knew it, he was in the ball-room.

He had fancied Blossom scorned, and doomed to sit in a corner: on the contrary, she came down the room, at the moment of his entrance, looking as fresh as the rose in her hair. He had come prepared to dare the sneers of the entire feminine portion of the garrison, if need be, in her behalf; but it seemed there was no occasion for his services: and after a slight greeting to the girl and her mother, whom she had joined, he passed on

to the upper end of the room. Poor Blossom bit her lip, and could hardly keep back her tears. He had not noticed the half-extended hand, nor did he dream that the glow on her face had been called up by the sight of his figure in the doorway.

"Curse his pride!" muttered the woman, drawing back into her corner. He was like the rest of them.

The captain passed on slowly up the room to the group at the head, the centre of which was the major's daughter.

"Where have you been?" chirruped Miss Laud, who had a young lieutenant at each elbow, and was making eyes at a third just behind her shoulder. "You don't deserve to know that I saved a waltz for you till the evening was half over."

"And am I too late to claim it? I have been detained," the captain said, making a bold plunge, and telling a lie in sheer desperation.

"Entirely too late. You should have come before, sir." The girl could afford to play the tyrant to-night, with half a dozen young men hanging about her. "We are just going."

"Perhaps Miss Bryce will be more indulgent," he said, advancing to Claudia, who strove to appear unconscious and at ease, as the gentlemen about her fell back at this address.

Poor Claudia would have stepped down and out upon the floor with a happy heart, but for this unfortunate assertion of her friend, which would make compliance appear eager. Why need Kitty have said that they were about to go home? A half-hour longer would make no difference, even though it were well on toward daylight. Mrs. Bryce had already risen. Claudia rose now, and drew her lace shawl about her neck.

"Yes, we are just going," she said. If he would only persist, she would give way. Dear me! how gladly she would have given way! But no: he stepped back, with a bow and some half-intelligible words of regret; and Mrs. Bryce and her party swept down the room, and out. Their fine dresses touched Mrs. Stubbs's gown as they passed; but no one of them bestowed a glance upon her or upon the little figure with frightened eyes by her side. The woman's face grew dark as she turned to look after them.

"I'll be even with you yet," she muttered behind her closed teeth; but still she made no movement to go.

And, now that the great lights had departed, Blossom had no lack of satellites. Admiration and attention were turned to her in a way that embarrassed and almost alarmed the child. The dancing still went on, though but feebly supported, and in time to music that lagged, and had lost its spirit. One after another, the ladies were taking their departure. The men straggling in from the supper-room sought out and sued for a presentation to the sutler's pretty daughter. Leaning over her, they breathed bold compliments in her ears, too strongly perfumed with wine to be acceptable. Mrs. Stubbs sat like a sphinx, mute and unseeing. Or was the woman flattered by this late notice of the girl, who smiled, though her lips trembled, and tears came into her eyes? Lieutenant Orme, at a little distance, looked on, angry, and tempted to interfere.

"Why doesn't she take her daughter home?" the boy said to himself, growing hot and cold by turns, as the play went on. "Good Heavens! What is the old woman thinking of?" as Captain Luttrell swaggered toward the group.

The music still rose and fell in voluptuous cadence ; but one after another the dancers fell off, and slipped away.

All at once the woman roused herself.

"Eh, Blossom !" she said, starting from her stupor as though she had been dreaming, and gazing with suddenly awakened eyes upon the men gathered about them. "What's this ? It's time we were going, child."

Some of the gay young fellows took it up with a hardly suppressed laugh, repeating the girl's fanciful pet name. One boldly begged the privilege of bringing her shawl. Another offered to see her safely home.

"Stand out of the way, will you ?" hiccoughed Captain Luttrell, elbowing himself to the front. "She'd a d——sight rather an old friend 'd serve her. Hadn't you, my dear ?" leaning down toward Blossom.

"Keep a civil tongue in your head, or it'll be the worse for ye," retorted the widow angrily, rising up. There was something almost menacing in the movement ; and the little group fell back.

"——but she's a Tartar !" exclaimed one of the visitors in a low voice.

"She's Tar-t'rus itself," said Captain Luttrell, with a drunken laugh.

At this instant Captain Elyot came out from the supper-room with one of the visitors.

"What's this ?" said his companion ; but Captain Elyot did not wait to respond. He pushed straight through the little crowd ; for everybody in the room had started forward at Mrs. Stubbs's upraised voice.

"So you are going ? Allow me," and he stepped directly before Captain Luttrell.

He only partially comprehended what had occurred ;

but he had caught a glimpse of Blossom, white and tearful, behind her mother's defiant form.

"I will take you to the dressing-room."

"By ——, Elyot," said Captain Luttrell, "what d'ye mean by your —— interference? I was just about to see these ladies home myself."

"Stand out of the way, sir." And, thrusting him aside with his elbow, the young man sent the drunken captain of cavalry reeling to the floor, while he conducted Mrs. Stubbs and her daughter to the dressing-room.

CHAPTER XVI.

SKIRMISHES.

CAPTAIN LUTTRELL had forgotten his wrath by the next morning. He had forgotten, indeed, much of what had occurred toward the close of the evening before, and was somewhat ashamed of the part he had played as it was set before him by his friends, who, perhaps, exaggerated his misdemeanors in order to hide their own. He blustered and swore, however, which was a very harmless way of venting his anger, vowing that nothing but the fact that he was to leave at mid-day with the troops ordered south prevented his demanding an apology from Captain Elyot. As it was, he should be obliged to put aside personal affairs for the time. He asserted, with a great show of indignation, that he had only intended to be civil to the widow and her daughter; and, if the former chose to resent his well-meant offer of service, it was no fault of his, "and no reason, by —, why Elyot should interfere." It was at this point in discussing the affair that he allowed himself to be soothed, and suffered his anger to cool, after a list of oaths more curious than intelligible.

The story of the little encounter spread through the fort, and even entered the major's house before breakfast the next morning.

"Dear me! Have you heard the news?" cried Miss Laud, bursting into the parlor, where that meal was being set out, with her hair in a most unbecoming twist, and with a wrapper thrown hastily about her form. Jinny had brought the story, with a jug of hot water, that very moment to her bedroom, having but just received it from Sergeant McDougal, who had dropped into the kitchen for a moment's gossip.

The major took his seat at the table, entirely unmoved by this female bomb; but Mrs. Bryce and Claudia exclaimed together: Of course they had heard nothing at all.

"There was a brawl in the ball-room last night after we left," Miss Laud went on. "And all about Mrs. Stubbs's daughter. I don't know the particulars, except that Captain Elyot took up her defence, fought a dozen men single-handed, and bore her off in triumph at last. I declare I wish we had staid: it must have been as good as a play."

"Do you hear that, Major Bryce?" gasped his wife. Claudia's emotions rendered her incapable of speech.

But the major burst into a loud laugh.

"Not so fast — not so fast, my dear," he said to their guest, who had poured out this startling story. "There was but one man floored, I believe; and he could hardly have kept his feet under any circumstances. There was no quarrel at all. Some of the gentlemen had taken too much wine, and one of them offered some impertinence to Mrs. Stubbs's daughter, which Elyot resented, as any man of honor would: I'd have done as much myself," added the stout major.

Upon which Claudia found strength to speak.

"Papa is always roused when any slight is offered to

the Stubbses," she said sharply. Even her own father had gone over to the enemy. It was more than she could bear.

"Of course he is," retorted the major gallantly. "Room for the ladies, bless their hearts!"

"Ladies!" cried Mrs. Bryce, coming to Claudia's assistance. "What did the woman mean by thrusting herself and her daughter among us last night?"

"Why not?" retorted the major. "Perhaps she enjoys a bit of fun as well as the rest of you; and the little girl, — why shouldn't she go and dance with the best of 'em? What were all the young men thinking about last night? I'd a mind to take her out myself."

"That would have been a fine sight, and a pretty example for a man of your years and in your position, Major Bryce," said his wife indignantly. "For my part I cannot see what there is about the girl to so bewitch you all. To think of Captain Elyot spending evening after evening there," — which was by no means true, — "to the entire neglect of his old friends. Captain Elyot led about by that dreadful woman! and actually taking it upon himself to act the part of protector to the daughter! Mrs. Stubbs is a shrewd woman. Oh! it isn't for nothing that she invites him to her house," she added, wagging her head, and looking as wise as an owl.

"Of course 'it isn't for nothing,'" repeated the major, with something very like a wink to little Miss Laud, who, having thus aroused a domestic storm, had quietly seated herself at the breakfast-table. "'It isn't for nothing' that any of you are so kind to us poor fellows. Why shouldn't she make up to him? Hasn't she a daughter to provide for as well as the rest of us? And if some fine young fellow with a gold plum just

ready to drop into his mouth should come knocking at our door, do you think we should turn him away? No, indeed! We would put on our best bibs and tuckers, and meet him with the sweetest smile we could call up, and set before him the best there was in the house, and urge him to come again and again. Shouldn't we, Claudia?"

"If I cannot eat my breakfast without being insulted, I had better go away," said Claudia in a choking voice.

"You don't know what it is to have daughters to look out for," cried the major's wife, forgetting their visitor, who, indeed, was no stranger to these little domestic scenes, and kept her eyes meekly dropped upon her plate.

"By ——, I know what it is to support 'em," replied the major, beating a retreat, and leaving the ladies to spend the remainder of their wrath in tears.

Even Jinny in the kitchen knew that there had been a quarrel, and lingered over taking away the breakfast things to gather what she could before returning to her friend the sergeant, who had dropped in, ostensibly to light his pipe at her fire. She and the sergeant had already discussed the affair of the ball-room, and were perfectly well aware of the interest Miss Claudia would feel in Captain Elyot's interference. But Jinny, whatever her natural preferences might be, was bound to uphold the honor of her young mistress and the house to which she belonged.

"Miss Claudia bean't a-goin' to set hersel' agen the like o' the sutler's daughter," she said with a toss of her head. "Not but that the lass is a gude lass enow in her way."

"Her needn't try," retorted the sergeant, who stood

in the open door, ready to leave at the first signs of the appearance of any of the family. "The little un's worth two o' the like o' she."

"Eh! Whatever d'ye mean, mon! Miss Claudia's a fine young leddy as ye'll see in a lang day. Sic a shape as she has! An' she'll speak ye French like a Frenchifier!"

"Shape!"—and the sergeant drew a long breath through his pipe, emitting the smoke slowly from his nose—"so's a skillaton! It's flesh an' bluid, Jinny, 's wholesome t' look at. An' for yer French, a man'll be hard t' please who is na conteent to be railed at in his ain tongue."

This was a proposition which Jinny could not refute; and, as Mrs. Bryce's step was heard approaching, the sergeant took himself off without more words.

As for Mrs. Bryce, she directed the ways of her household this morning with a pre-occupied mind and an absent air, which Jinny did not fail to notice. The major's wife was revolving a scheme which had occurred to her more than once before this day. It was quite time, she argued with herself, that some one took Mrs. Stubbs in hand. If her house was the resort of the officers, as Mrs. Bryce believed it to be, (had not Jinny reported more than once the sound of music and a blaze of light from the window of Blossom's parlor, and at midnight too!) it was time that some one put down what would soon become an open scandal. And who could so appropriately undertake the work as the wife of the commanding officer? Was Mrs. Stubbs so ignorant of the world and its ways as not to know that she would soon bring her house, and her daughter as well, into ill repute, if, indeed, she had not done so already?

The major's house had not been thronged with visitors. Mrs. Bryce's parlor was not filled night after night with the idlers about the post, as she fancied Mrs. Stubbs's to be. Claudia might be a fine girl, as her maid had declared, and could boast even more accomplishments than that faithful servant had vaunted; but there was no strife over her among the young men. The mother uttered a sigh over this reflection, forgetting that this very circumstance was what she had decried in the sutler's daughter. Poor Mrs. Bryce! She knew, even better than her husband, what expensive luxuries daughters had become; for upon her fell the task of stretching every penny to its utmost, and making the most of the income from a very small private fortune which eked out the major's pay. This pinching and devising, and turning every way, had worn her out. She would have scorned the idea of having schemed or laid snares in her daughter's behalf; but she had put Claudia forward to the best of her ability. She had striven to make her home a pleasant place to such of the young men as chose to nibble at the innocent bait she offered. One after another the fresh arrivals at the post had frequented her house for a time, and then dropped off. The free, rollicking gossip and companionship by Stubbs's fireside came gradually to be preferred by each one to the more refined atmosphere of the major's parlor. It was mortifying, at the best, when the woman came to realize it, as she did after a time; but now that the last, and by far the most desirable, of these young men, had been drawn away, not by Stubbs's punch, but by the superior attractions of his daughter over her own, the mother's heart rebelled.

Captain Elyot would never marry the sutler's daugh-

ter. Of that Mrs. Bryce felt assured in her own mind. To receive the frequent visits, then, which she believed he still paid to her, could be only a disadvantage, if not worse, to the girl. Was it not her duty to set this in its true light before Mrs. Stubbs? Some duties have all the sweetness of revenge, and this was one of them. She said nothing of her purpose to her husband, or to the two young ladies who had settled themselves for a long morning in the parlor, the roses of which appeared somewhat faded by daylight. They had brought out their worsted-work, and, a calm having succeeded the storm at the breakfast-table, were discussing their partners of the night before, with an occasional yawn between; Miss Laud, with an eye, in the mean while, upon the window, and an ear for any stray tap at the door. There was a possibility of a hurried call from some of these new acquaintances who were to set off for the south at noon. But Claudia drew her little blue shawl close about her thin shoulders, and bent herself steadily to her work. "Two blues, three whites, and a green:" she counted her stitches carefully, and made no mistakes. The only caller she cared to see would not come. She had looked for him too many days already: why should she waste her time any longer?—as though time were given us to be marked out in black and purple, and shaded in carefully with scarlet and blue and pink!

. When Mrs. Bryce saw the girls thus busily engaged for an hour or two at least, so that her absence would not be questioned, she wrapped herself up carefully, as though to wrap her courage in, lest it should escape her, and slipped out of the house upon her self-appointed mission. The day was clear and cold; and the snow

creaked under her feet as she followed the path leading down to the sutler's house. More than one friend tapped on the window, and beckoned her to come in, as she hastened by; but she shook her head. She would not be diverted from her purpose. About the barracks there were unusual signs of life this morning: the members of the company which was to leave were making themselves ready; knapsacks were being strapped on, and blankets rolled up; "rat-tat-tat-tat"! sounded the drum as the men wheeled and marched before her. There was much in this bustle of preparation to harmonize with the mood of the major's wife. She, too, was buckling on her sword, knowing that the sutler's wife would not be the mildest of adversaries; for, though she was going ostensibly to offer advice, she knew in her heart that she should not get off without the clash of arms. Nor was she entirely assured in her own mind as to the result. And it was because of this doubt that she had concealed her proposed visit from Claudia and the major. She could not forget, that, in their last encounter, she had been worsted by the sutler's wife.

She found Mrs. Stubbs alone in the store. Perhaps the excitement aroused by the departure of the troops had made trade more dull than usual this morning, or it might be that it had exhausted itself in the preparations for the ball the night before. Whatever the cause, Mrs. Stubbs was quite at liberty to attend to her visitor. She came slowly down behind the rude counter, with none of the suave eagerness which an ordinary shopkeeper displays at sight of a customer.

"How can I serve ye, ma'am?" she asked, with the defiant meekness which she had assumed of late toward the ladies of the army.

And then Mrs. Bryce girded herself, and prepared for the battle, adjusted her sling, as it were; for she felt herself to be no more than a David — stout woman though she was, and the major's wife too — before this Goliath in a dusty bombazine gown, and with beruffled hair.

"I only came in for a little chat," said the major's wife, advancing to the counter, and crossing her hands upon it.

There was dignity in the attitude; but there was nothing friendly in it, nor in the tones of her voice. She spoke boldly; but her heart had begun to fail her already.

"I believe I do not wish for any thing, thank you. Or you may give me a paper of assorted needles, if you please. I think that is all," she said.

But Mrs. Stubbs made no movement toward complying with this modest request, if request it was.

"You can say your say, ma'am," she replied, neither offering her visitor a chair, nor unlocking the gaunt arms folded across the bosom of her rusty gown.

"I—I was sorry to hear of the trouble in the ball-room last night," began Mrs. Bryce, plunging into the middle of the subject, since she must begin somewhere.

"There was no trouble at all, ma'am," said the sutler's widow. "Cap'n Luttrell forgot his manners, which was nothing new for him, as you may know; an' Cap'n Elyot knocked him down."

She added the last quietly, as though it were a natural sequence, and was moving away, when Mrs. Bryce took up the words. The major's wife was accustomed to deference from the people about her; and the dignity of Mrs. Stubbs's manner was nothing less than premedi-

tated insult in her eyes. It provoked her to wrath. Before she knew it, she had let slip the rope which held her temper, and cast it to the winds.

"Yes, Captain Elyot," she repeated, seizing upon his name. "It is always Captain Elyot: he comes here frequently, I understand."

"An' what if he does?" asked the woman, with a sudden intensity of heat in eye and voice.

It was not true: that was the sting. But why should Mrs. Bryce sit in judgment upon her visitors?

"You need not resent my words, Mrs. Stubbs. I have a daughter of my own, or I should not have presumed to interfere" (which was more true than she intended). "It is all very well for the young men to be spending their evenings here, very natural, I would say, since they have always done so, and very agreeable, I don't doubt; but considering that your daughter has no natural protector, no father, did it never occur to you that all this freedom of living might occasion remark?"

"Is it Cap'n Elyot you're speaking of, ma'am?"

Mrs. Stubbs's breath came hard and fast, but she held in her wrath. A less pre-occupied woman than the major's wife would have dreaded the explosion that must follow. But Mrs. Bryce took heart at the apparently innocent question. Evidently the sutler's wife was about to listen to reason.

"I did not intend to call names," she said mysteriously. "I only dropped in to put you on your guard, as it were, against the speech of people. I have heard so much of late!"

"Speak it out, ma'am: I ain't afraid to hear it. Perhaps you'll be good enough to tell me just what it is you have heard."

"It does not matter," Mrs. Bryce stumbled on, finding herself thus driven to a corner. "I only desired to put you in mind of what any woman must know,—that young men have a way of hanging about a girl, if she is pretty and amiable, without any thought of marriage; and I fear our young men are no exception to this rule. There is this young man," Mrs. Bryce went on, emboldened by Mrs. Stubbs's silence,— "I need not call his name,—circumstances have thrown him into familiar acquaintance with your family. But do not build too strongly upon this. I would not say any thing against him; but—it is not the first time he has fancied a face, and forgotten it."

Unconsciously she showed her wound. But Mrs. Stubbs was too absorbed in her own thoughts to take advantage of it; though the truth of Mrs. Bryce's words struck to her heart. Every one knew that Captain Elyot had once spent his idle hours at the major's, and that now he went there no more. And would this same play go on in her own house? and would Blossom be scorned, in turn? Had he not already begun to weary of her? In the hurried retrospect of the moment Mrs. Stubbs grew cold at heart, remembering how infrequent his visits had been of late. Her anxiety rose to a passion.

"What do you mean by your soft words with a sting in 'em?" she burst out, starting towards her visitor, who, entirely taken by surprise at this unexpected attack, made a hasty retreat towards the door. "What is it to you who comes or goes? Have a care over your own daughter, though it's little enough you'll be troubled with the young men hanging about her."

By this time Mrs. Bryce had found the latch of the

door. In that tolerably secure position she made an attempt to rally her forces.

“You will repent this, Mrs. Stubbs. I am sure you will repent this. I—I shall speak to the major”—

“Get along with you!” cried the angry woman. “The major’d never insult an honest woman in her own house. An’ as for the child, you’re set against her with yer lies,—you an’ your white-faced daughter. But she’s as good as the best of ye, an’ equal to the best of ye she shall be yet, if I die for’t. Will ye never go?”

She made another movement towards the major’s wife, which sent that zealous reformer to the path outside, and home indeed. She almost believed that personal violence had been threatened her, and was hardly conscious of her utter defeat, so thankful was she to escape with her life.

But as she hastened home, looking neither to the right nor to the left, one other cause of self-gratulation occurred to her, and that was that her husband would never know of this visit.

CHAPTER XVII.

“ARE THESE TEARS FOR ME?”

WHEN the door had closed upon the major's wife, her words burned in Mrs. Stubbs's ears. Did they talk about the child? The woman laughed a bitter, scornful laugh. She had been too proud to defend herself when accused of keeping an open house to whoever might come. The major, or any one of the officers, could tell a different story. She believed that Mrs. Bryce knew to the contrary herself. It was not for that she had come to her: it was to utter the hateful insinuations in regard to Captain Elyot; and envy and spite had moved her to it. And yet might not the words prompted by jealousy be true? Oh, how they accorded with Mrs. Stubbs's own fears! She had marked the change in the young man long before this time. He had become silent and constrained in Blossom's presence; nor did he frequent the house as he had done at first. Days and even weeks went by, and he paid them no visit. In the idle life at the fort, to will was to act. Negligence was indifference. She remembered how rumor had coupled his name with Miss Claudia the winter before. She had seen them together day after day, or watched him coming away from the major's door.

And now it was all over. Without any apparent cause the intimacy had come to an end. And was it to be so with Blossom, who already watched for his coming, and grew red and pale at a tap on the door? The mother had marked it all, furious and distressed by turns. Must she stand by helpless, and see the child grow thin and pale and broken-hearted, as women did who are left forlorn? — not women of Mrs. Stubbs's mould; but Blossom was of a different type, as the mother had discovered long ago; and might she not droop and even die under it? Oh, if they were but away from this hateful place! — anywhere in the wide world, only away from these people whom she hated, and who, banded together, as she believed, had set themselves against her and the child.

She moved about her work with heavy feet, and dragging, listless hands. It was a dull day within doors; and there was less than usual to take her thoughts from this subject, upon which they dwelt continually now. Sometimes scraps of song stole through the closed door from the room where Blossom sat alone. Mrs. Stubbs paused to listen. They were not the merry songs, full of "tir-ra-la-la," over which she and the lieutenant had spent so many happy hours, but songs of sentiment, a feeble sentiment perhaps (that in the girl's heart, it may be, was hardly deeper); but the sad refrain stirred the mother anew. It broke off in something like a sob, she fancied. And did the child cry for him, — for this man who held her in such light esteem? Or were her tears for the boy who was to ride away to-day? Not for him. The woman put that thought away at once. She had seen enough the evening before to convince her that young Orme held no precious corner in Blossom's affec-

tions. Suddenly a burst of martial music shook the little log-house. Mrs. Stubbs threw up the window, and leaned out. The winter sun shone far and near over snow-white, monotonous landscape, and upon the company of men marching out and away to an unknown fate. A sensation of stifling oppressed the woman. Some old memory awoke in her at this sudden burst of bugle and drum. Oh, to be shut up here, despised and hating, when all the world lay stretched out just beyond these ugly walls! Other windows were thrown open; forms went hurrying by. The band played "Garry Owen," amid cheers and shouts and waving hands. Only this one figure in its pall-like dress stared fixed and unmoved by all the commotion, neither laughing with those who were gay at heart, nor weeping with the women left behind.

"She's nae like t' mortal flesh!" exclaimed Sergeant McDougal to Jinny, who had run out, with the skirt of her gown thrown over her head, to see the men march away. "They do say she's awfu' strange these days since Stubbs died. I'd no like to get the cast o' her ee;" and the sergeant stepped back out of the range of that awful member.

"The deil's in her, that's a'," replied Jinny sententiously.

"An' what's that but an evil ec?" returned the man. "Mind she don't turn it on ye, lass;" and he pulled her away from before the house. A white handkerchief fluttered a moment at the parlor-window as young Orme rode by. Blossom stood at the window, with tears in her eyes, which she made no effort to conceal. Another figure, taller and with a more martial air, rode by the lieutenant's side. Captain Elyot bowed low, and

removed his hat, as the lieutenant doffed his own and smiled a pitiful smile that nearly broke his heart, in reply to Blossom's salutation. The boy had not trusted himself to say adieu.

"I should only make a fool of myself, and it is better to — she will never know," he said.

There were no colors flying at the sutler's; but Blossom's cheeks hung out a flag for a moment as Captain Elyot took off his hat; but her thoughts followed the boy, who was riding away, with a tender regret it is sweet to have inspired. She little dreamed that he had laid his heart at her feet. She never knew to the day of her death of the boyish love she had aroused; but he stood first in her thoughts always among the friends who in life go riding out into the sunshine with flying colors and beating drums, leaving our hearts sorrowful and heavy.

"Good-by, good-by!" he said to one and another as he rode slowly out and away; but he had no word for Blossom. We give words to those we care least for: tears and heart-aches, and smiles sadder than tears, are for those we love.

"Do you repent?" asked the captain. "I'm afraid it's too late to do any thing for you, boy; but I wish I were going in your place."

"Repent? No." But the landscape blurred before the young lieutenant's eyes. "If I staid, I should make a fool of myself very likely." Then it came out almost with a sob, "I tried — last night."

The captain turned his face, but not his eyes, toward him. He felt the hot blood fly to his cheeks.

"Well."

"She didn't understand, she hardly heard. I was talk-

ing about my going away; and, Elyot," — it was mortifying; but this was one of those last moments when men speak the truth, without sparing themselves, — "she was not listening to me at all. And then I knew it was all over."

"Perhaps you were mistaken. Why, man, what did you expect? Her silence" —

"It wasn't that she was silent. But what's the use? A man knows when he's beaten, and there's an end of it. Don't, Elyot: I can't bear to talk of it. But do you remember what I said long ago, the first time we spoke of this? Well, that's the truth of it. I knew it then: I'm sure of it now. There, God bless you, old fellow! You needn't stay away any longer on my account: only don't say a word to me now; I can't bear it." And, touching his horse with his spurs, the boy rode on alone.

Mrs. Stubbs, leaning out from her window, silent and spectre-like, had been more observant than the bystanders knew. She had seen the two heads uncovered before the window from which Blossom was, doubtless, making her adieus to her friends. The woman followed the two figures, riding side by side, with her baleful eyes.

"Ay, ride away," she said between her shut teeth, letting her gaze rest upon Captain Elyot, — "ride away without a thought of them that's looking after ye, and some day ye'll be riding away for good and all; and then what'll become o' the child?"

Captain Elyot came back, after an hour or two, alone, his horse covered with foam, as though it had been hard ridden; and, throwing the bridle to a servant, he strolled into the store. It was the lounging-place of the

officers who were debarred the privilege of entering the parlor in these days of Mrs. Stubbs's undivided sway; and usually a group of men were gathered about the little round table in one corner, or formed an effectual screen for the red-hot stove; but this morning Mrs. Stubbs was left to her own society. Outside events had conspired to draw away the usual frequenters of the place. She gave but a cool nod of welcome to her visitor now. But Mrs. Stubbs's moods were altogether too varied and inexplicable to allow of their being the subject of inquiry; and the young man, engrossed with his own thoughts, hardly noticed the change in her manner.

"So they're off," he said, half to himself. "I rode the first mile or two with them, and wished I were going the whole distance."

"Danger and death come quick enough, without wanting to go to meet 'em," replied the woman.

"I suppose so, and I've no especial desire for either; but—I believe I hated to have the boy go;" and the captain turned away abruptly, and stared out at the window.

The woman watched him with eyes sharp as a lancet. He had a kind heart toward that smooth-faced boy. She had probed that far without difficulty; but was it not as the major's wife had said? Already he was wishing himself away. Better that he should go, and make an end of it all. Better that there should be an end to his visits, to his familiar intercourse with Blossom, here and now. There was a kind of bitter pleasure in taking matters into her own hands, and sending him from her house before he entirely took himself away. As she watched him, these half-formed thoughts passed

through her mind, and hardened into a resolution. Then she spoke, —

“I’ve got something t’ say t’ ye, Cap’n Elyot.”

He turned from the window with his own reverie still dimming his eyes and clouding his perceptions. She had come to him before now for advice in regard to her affairs, — more to tempt him with a show of her means than because she valued his opinion. It was that, or perhaps a bit of garrison gossip, which, in genial moods, Mrs. Stubbs was not above retailing. He even fancied, with a glow at his heart, that it might be of Blossom she was about to speak. He was ashamed to remember how hard and fast he had ridden back here, to Blossom’s very door, after leaving his friend; how eager he had been to put himself at once in the way of temptation, now that he was absolved from his promise to the lieutenant. For a temptation he felt it to be to venture into Blossom’s presence, since he was by no means sure that he wanted to marry Mrs. Stubbs’s daughter. It was partly this dissatisfaction with himself which had made him wish he might have accompanied his friend.

“Yes, I’ve got something to say to ye,” repeated Mrs. Stubbs, bracing herself to utter what was not easy to utter without anger or provocation. “I’ve been thinkin’, Cap’n Elyot, that it’s all very well for you to be payin’ your visits to Blossom, an’ bringin’ her books an’ trinkets I’ve no name for. I ain’t the one to be unthankful for kindness t’ the child (the Lord knows it’s little enough of it she’s had here); but it’s set folks’ tongues awaggin’, an’ so there may as well be an end t’ it.”

She had worked herself into a state of excitement

almost as effective as wrath, by her little speech which had had a still more startling effect upon her listener. He was dumb with astonishment.

"But, Mrs. Stubbs," he began after a moment, groping about blankly, and trying to stagger up after this thunderbolt.

His visits to Blossom! Why, he had scarcely seen the girl for weeks! And they talked about it!

"Who has talked about it? Who has been putting such nonsense into your head?" he asked angrily.

"Why, Mrs. Stubbs, I had not seen your daughter for a month, until last night."

"It may be nonsense to you, Cap'n Elyot," returned the woman in a hard voice; "an so I think ye'd best be going your way, without regard to me and mine. There's girls enough as would be glad to see your handsome face. Yes, it's nonsense to you, I don't doubt," she repeated, growing angry. Did not these very words of his show how lightly he esteemed the girl? "It's always nonsense to such as you; but it might be life and death to the child."

The hot blood burned in the man's face. Was it true? Did even the mother believe that the child was not indifferent to him?

"And did you think that I could harm a hair of her head? Why, woman" —

The truth almost flew from his lips.

"Men like you never mean any harm."

A fire, long smothered, which no deed or word of his had kindled, burst from the woman's heart.

"I've seen the like of you before now," she said. "You've a kind word, and a soft word, an' a way with ye that 'ud wile a woman's soul out of her eyes; an'

then ye're up an' away, without a thought o' the break-in' hearts ye leave behind ye. D'ye think, man, I a'n't had tears o' my own to cry when nobody cared for 'em? Though, God forgive me! I'd forgotten it all years ago. An' she's not like one who could laugh, and swear maybe at the worst. She's a soft little thing, with a heart as would break if ye laid yer finger heavy on it."

"Who has put such folly into your head?" burst out Captain Elyot in his wrath. "As God is my judge, I have felt only respect and affection for her; and I will hear from her own lips who has lied so to you both."

And, before Mrs. Stubbs could realize what he was about to do, he had struck with a heavy hand upon the door opening into Blossom's parlor. He hardly waited for the startled response which followed, but pushed the door open, and stepped into the room.

"What does it mean?" he asked, taking Blossom's hands, from which her work had fallen as she started from her seat at his abrupt entrance. "Who has been talking to your mother about me?"

But Blossom's face showed only perplexity and confusion at this sudden attack.

"She says that I am not to come here any more; that I am never to see you again," the captain went on in a loud voice. "Is this true, Blossom? And do *you* send me away?"

"I?" And Blossom threw a bewildered glance toward her mother, who appeared like a black spectre in the doorway.

Blossom's face grew white as death.

"What is it? I cannot bear it," she said in a faint voice.

“I told you so,” cried the woman, springing forward. But Captain Elyot put her back, and took the girl in his arms.

“Does it hurt you that I am to go away? Are these tears for me? Please God they are the last you shall shed for me, dear little heart; for nobody shall send me away!”

CHAPTER XVIII.

CLAUDIA'S SONG.

THERE are times when every thing seems to tend toward one result; adverse circumstances, as well as strivings and prayers, acting as levers and pulleys and beams to bring about what we have never desired. We work with our might, and, lo! the one thing we have never wished for comes to pass. We use all our strength against it; and that which we have tried to avert falls upon us at last, our very efforts having only hastened the end. It is enough to make one believe in fate, or, better still, in Providence, which sees beyond our short vision, and takes in all, while we strive but for a part.

Something like this Mrs. Bryce felt when she learned, as she did before many days, that Captain Elyot was going to marry the sutler's daughter. Her unfortunate interference must have helped it on. The captain had not made love to Blossom at last at the top of his voice, and with every door open, without some passing ear catching his protestations; and the major's wife knew that she had precipitated him into this folly. He had stood upon the brink before her ill-judged visit; but how many men have occupied that precarious position, and have safely retreated! But she had pushed

him over. And then she rejoiced that the major would never know of her visit to Mrs. Stubbs. It was all that remained to rejoice over; and even to this she brought very few timbrels or harps. Nor would Claudia know that she had made an effort in her behalf. But she had done her duty, and this reflection gave her some little satisfaction. The fact that nothing but confusion and disappointment had come of it only brought that resignation to her so natural to women, and so very sensible, in fact for everybody, when there is really nothing more to be done.

“It was all her own fault,” Miss Laud said to herself; for there was no one else with whom she could commune upon this topic. Claudia was out of the question; and it was to Claudia she referred. Oh, if the Fates had but put these threads into her hands, the result would have been different indeed! Miss Laud soliloquized. She was going away. An opportunity had offered, and an escort was provided for her to return to her home in the States; and the young woman was not sorry to set out. The visions of conquest and glory with which she had arrived at Fort Atchison had never been realized, nor had her friendship for the major’s daughter been able to bear the strain which isolation from the world and constant companionship had put upon it. Claudia bemoaned her departure, as in politeness bound; but the tears she shed over it lacked the sincerity of those which dropped in secret over the news of the approaching marriage. They were not many, and they were soon wiped away; for Claudia was of a practical turn of mind. Outwardly she had received this news with an indifference which astonished her friend. But pride had come in at the death of her hopes; and it was almost a relief to know the worst.

Captain Elyot and Blossom were not married at once, but before the spring had fairly brushed away the snow from the gulches by the river. By this time, the new sutler had arrived; and Mrs. Stubbs's occupation was gone. He was a dashing young fellow, with airs and ways, and tricks of trade, which set the woman quite aghast; but, as he had no family, she and Blossom were free to remain in the house as long as they chose, which was only until after the wedding. Captain Elyot was already preparing a home for his bride; and Mrs. Stubbs could not be separated from Blossom. It was, perhaps, because the wedding followed so soon after the announcement of the engagement, that none of the ladies at the post found time to call upon the girl who was presently to take her place among them. Every one, from the major's wife down, maintained a disagreeable silence in regard to the affair whenever Captain Elyot appeared, — a silence which could only be interpreted as disapproval. It was from his male friends alone that he received congratulations. He would gladly have dispensed with them altogether; yet their absence made him both angry and ill at ease.

He was utterly unconscious of the interest Mrs. Bryce had taken in his affairs. Mrs. Stubbs was the last person in the world to own that her triumph was due to the interference of the major's wife; nor did he dream that Claudia had any cause of complaint against him. He had been remiss in paying his visits there, and a slight coolness had followed in consequence. But he had never doubted for a moment that it was in his power to place himself upon the old footing, if he chose to do so; and some such desire awoke within him now. He was very much in love. He did not by any means repent of

the step he had taken: it was for Blossom's sake that he desired to renew his friendship with the major's family, in order that these, his oldest friends at the post, might rejoice with him in his happiness. The wedding was to be a most quiet affair. It could not be otherwise; since Blossom had no friends to invite, and Captain Elyot's would hardly have come for the asking.

A few nights before the event, he dropped in at the major's. He was most graciously received. Nothing could be more affable than Miss Claudia's manner.

"And how are you to-night, Captain Elyot?" The major's wife rose with some difficulty. She was quite stout, and by no means so agile as she had been once; but she gave him both her hands. "How kind of you to look in on us in the storm!" for the rain fell heavily outside.

Claudia offered him but one hand; but the polite smile that went with it made it as good as two.

"There seems to be an end to the winter at last," the major's wife went on. "Still the air is raw and chill. Draw your chair closer to the fire, and let me call Jinny to bring more wood;" and Mrs. Bryce bustled up with a fine show of hospitable feeling, and slipped out of the room under this pretext. How did she know that the captain had not a word to say to Claudia? What if he had repented, after all? Though this could hardly be, since the chaplain's wife had told her that the services of her husband had been engaged for Friday, which was only two days away. To think of their choosing a Friday! And the major's wife, who had not been to call Jinny at all, but stood shivering with cold in the little passage leading to the kitchen, set her wits to work to determine what catastrophe was most likely to follow

such a disregard of the oracles. No : it was hardly possible that he had come to say he repented, though she remembered a cavalry captain upon the South Platte who had changed his mind at the last moment, when the chaplain stood waiting in the next room with his book in his hand. But something had come to light in regard to the girl; and Mrs. Bryce thought, with an unconscious sigh, that it was not at all probable that any thing would come to light in regard to Blossom. Nothing could be said against her, so far as she knew, in spite of her officious warning to Mrs. Stubbs. But this only made it the worse. And this girl, sitting passive and meek, had gathered in her harvest, while she, Mrs. Bryce, had striven and toiled, and almost prayed, and had reaped nothing at all. The major's wife wiped a tear from the corner of her eye, and then went off in search of Jinny and the firewood.

"Come, come, Jinny," she called in a loud, cheerful voice upon her return, when her hand was on the latch of the parlor-door. After all, there was a chance that something had been said in her absence.

But any hope which she had nursed in that little, cold, dark passage, died within her when she entered the room. She might as well have staid and made herself comfortable; for nothing had come of her going away, she saw at once. Claudia and her visitor sat as she had left them, on either side of the deadened fire. Claudia's voice rang out gayly as she opened the door; but the mother knew that the girl had pulled at the rope with an effort to make it do so.

The conversation had been of the most commonplace order.

"I suppose you are inconsolable without your friend.

What a bright little thing she is!" the captain had said. And Miss Claudia replied that she was indeed quite desolate without Kitty, who had set off for the States a few days before, and who was, to be sure, a very "bright little thing." Oh! was she not? "and deep and sly," she thought in her heart. But she was entirely too conscious of her limitations to be entirely at ease. To the past she could not refer; to the future she would not, — at least to any future in which Captain Elyot had an interest; and the present time at the dull little fort afforded but few topics of interest.

"I shall not have a penny to my purse," she said at last with a laugh, "if the new sutler continues as he has begun. I cannot pass the door, mamma knows." And Mrs. Bryce shook her head with a mock sigh, which might have been real, since she did know to her sorrow. "They are such artful creatures! these trading-people," Claudia went on, with an air of innocence. "They discover their victims at once. My purse, before he had been here a week, was entirely at the mercy of this Blibbins, Blifkins, or whatever he is called."

This was possibly a little sword-practice in Claudia: she was trying, perhaps, to see how nearly she could approach the captain without making him wince. And he did wince, though he tried to stand up manfully before her.

"I suppose they are a good deal like other people," he said; but he was ill at ease, and she saw it, and rejoiced.

"Perhaps so." She shrugged her shoulders with a grimace, as though this were a question in natural history she did not care to pursue. "I brought home a roll of music last night to try. There was such a pretty

song!" and she leaned back in her chair, and picked up her guitar from the floor and the corner behind her. She laid it across her knee, and turned the keys, and tried its tone, with fingers very slim and white pressing the strings. The song was a simple thing, — something of love and constancy, set to a minor key, which makes the love seem always stronger, and the constancy more abiding. It touched the heart of Captain Elyot, though he forgot the singer. He listened with a rapt face, and eyes into which the tears started. It was a very pretty and effective move on Claudia's part, and much like a play, where the heroine goes off at last to tender and appropriate music; only that the dying heroine does not usually play her own accompaniment!

Perhaps Claudia realized that she was to pass out of the young man's life with this night and this little song; for she threw into it a strength of expression rare to her, and almost too great for the shallow words to carry. The major's wife moved out from the glare of the firelight, and wiped her eyes slyly as Claudia, her face thrown back, and softly flushed almost to beauty, sang, —

"Tender and true, adieu, adieu."

The poor little song had many tongues. It said one thing to Claudia, and quite another to Captain Elyot, and even found a voice in Mrs. Bryce's heart. When it was over, the hush that speaks louder than bells fell on the three. Then, after a moment, Captain Elyot rose to go.

"Thanks," he said simply to Claudia; but the glow on his face and the deep light in his eyes said more than words. Then he turned to the major's wife: "I believe it is no secret that I am to be married on

Friday," he went on in a slightly embarrassed voice. "If you and the major would come round at noon, I should be very glad. You will meet no one but the parties most interested," he added, with a blush and a laugh. "And Miss Claudia too. Pardon the awkwardness of the invitation: it has with me the disadvantage of novelty. I met the major on my way here, and he was so good as to promise he would look in." He did not say where: he could not bring himself to utter Mrs. Stubbs's name. Claudia's sword-practice had been even better than she knew.

Mrs. Bryce glanced quickly at her daughter, whose face showed nothing at all. She stood, with her hands crossed, and resting upon her guitar, her eyes gazing quietly into the fire, almost as though she had not heard him.

"I have asked no one but you," he went on: "I could not forget," he broke out impulsively, "that you were my first friends here." The quiet, homelike air of the room, the little song, had touched a spring in memory: all the time between dropped away. They had been his good, true friends, whom he had neglected a little of late.

The woman's heart yearned over the handsome young fellow, towering above her, who had grasped her hand as he spoke. Oh, how she would have rejoiced in him, had he chosen a wife here, instead of among those low people! But he could be nothing to her now.

"I always try to be a friend to the young men, if they will give me an opportunity," she said. The words chilled him, though they were uttered kindly enough. "And I shall be happy to be present at your marriage, of course. I am sure it was very kind in you

to remember us, and I hope you may never repent the step you are about to take." There was something in the tone of her voice which seemed to imply that he might repent it. She had not intended it; but the last moment had dragged the truth to the surface.

"Good-by." And Claudia gave him her hand: it was very cold. "And you will come?" It was hard if his friends would not rejoice with him. But Miss Bryce did not seem to have heard the question, put with much less assurance than he had used at first. A chill like that in the air outside was creeping over him.

"Good-by," she said with the same placid smile.

Could he urge it further? And what did he care for them all? or what were they to him, compared with the dear little girl who was waiting for him at this moment? And yet his heart was sore as he walked away from the house.

"You made no reply whatever when he asked you to come to his wedding," said Mrs. Bryce to Claudia, when the door had closed after him.

"I know. But I am not going: I could not tell him that," Claudia replied.

CHAPTER XIX.

DREAMS.

THEY were married very quietly, upon the inauspicious day which nobody remarked, except the major's wife. Claudia, at her window, saw the chaplain set out toward the sutler's quarters, with his book under his arm. For a moment, as she stood there looking out upon the morning, wet with a driving wind and rain, and not at all like a wedding morning, she wished that she were dead, so hopeless and bleak, and rained upon by disappointment, did life appear to her. The major's wife had sent an apology at the last moment. She was indisposed, — which was true, she had been indisposed to attend this wedding from the first; but she pleaded the wet day and incipient ague, and rejoiced in both.

Mrs. Stubbs would swell and strut, and plume her sable feathers; but it would not be in her presence. She would cut short her triumph in so much as was possible by lessening the number of lookers-on.

"You can go if you choose; but I shall not think of it," she said to the major, who was putting on his best uniform to do honor to the occasion.

"To be sure I shall go, my dear. Do you think I would put such a slight upon Elyot as to stay away?"

He's a fine young fellow, and a credit to the regiment. I wish to my heart" — and then the major for once bethought himself. But his wife knew what it was he wished. And so did she indeed; though what availed wishing? Had she not done even more, and all for nothing? He did not tell his wife that he was to act the part of a father to this girl whom she so envied, and was to give her away. That would have been quite too much to bear. But he made one more attempt to persuade her to accompany him.

"I think you had better go," he said. "It has an ugly look for both you and Claudia to stay away. And it's rather hard on Elyot if none of his friends are to stand by him."

But Mrs. Bryce refused.

"I might catch my death by venturing out on such a day," she said, drawing the shawl in which she was muffled close about her head. The major knew that this was only an excuse; but he did not press the point.

Claudia remained in her room until he had gone, when she appeared in the parlor-door, pulling the frill of the hood to her cloak about her head. "I promised to spend the day with Mrs. Kirknafether," she said. "If I shouldn't return by teatime, you may send Jinny round for me in the evening." The dark frill drawn close about her face made it appear more sharp and colorless than usual, even to the mother's eyes.

No, it was not strange that he should have chosen the other one. And yet Claudia would have made him a good, true wife, — a little sharp, perhaps; but she would have guarded his interests, and taken her place with the first ladies in the army, which Blossom never

could do. And then Claudia's face appeared again in the doorway.

"I believe you need not send for me, after all," she said. "Lieutenant Gibbs, or some one, is sure to be there, who will bring me home."

A weaker woman (and Claudia had been weak enough in the moments when she had any grounds for hope), a woman utterly weak, would have taken to her bed and tears; but she was beginning to remember that she was a soldier's daughter.

When the ceremony was over, Captain Elyot and his bride went at once quietly to their new home, without any of that joyous excitement which flutters so naturally about a wedding.

Mrs. Stubbs rejoiced, but with a wild joy which found little outward expression. Oh, how this end which she had so ardently desired had come about! And at the last moment, too, when she was filled with despair. She could almost have gone down upon her knees to the major's wife, who had so unwittingly helped it on. If it was his money—the money that was one day to be his—which Mrs. Bryce had coveted for her daughter, she might take it, and be welcome to it all. Mrs. Stubbs would have poured it out with her own hands as a thank-offering, had it been in her power to do so. Blossom had enough for them both. It was not the money she had desired, but the position he would give to the child, the fine friends who would gather about her: she would be "like the best of 'em," at last.

So, with a proud heart, the mother followed them to their new home. She would be a slave, if need be, to the man who had done so much for Blossom. She would be content to keep in the background, unknown

and unnoticed, or even to go away by herself at the last, when Blossom had reached the height of her grandeur, and to gaze upon it and her, humbly, from a distance. "I'd come to her maybe sometimes, just t' look at her, just t' touch her. I'd say I was the woman as nursed her; an' nobody'd know, none o' the grand folks would believe, that I was the mother that bore her." She planned it all out artfully, happy in Blossom's happiness, but with that restless joy which still seeks something beyond.

"They won't be staying here long," she said to Tolee, her servant and slave. "Your new master'll soon be leaving this place to go and live among his grand friends." And Tolee stared stupidly, but gathered enough meaning from the words to spread the saying about the garrison, where it only added to the scorn with which Mrs. Stubbs's pretensions were looked upon. Not that Mrs. Stubbs had any knowledge as to the intentions of the captain. A sudden awe of the young man had fallen upon her since he had stooped to raise her to his level. She did not dream of intruding upon his affairs, or of asking his plans for the future. It was enough that Blossom was to share that future. She was content to rely upon the stories which had passed without denial through the little community at the fort. And these, however varied they might be in minor particulars, all united in one grand truth, as she believed, which was, that, when some relative in the East should die, Captain Elyot would leave the army, and live "like a lord." But what this relative was to him, in what part of the States he resided, or how near he was to the final move which was to do so much for Blossom, she had no knowledge. The last query troubled her.

What if he were to live on for years?—till she herself had passed away without seeing Blossom's triumph. Or, worse than this, what if, in the fickle fortune of a soldier's life, Captain Elyot should be cut off before this end was reached? Oh, she could not be cheated out of this now! It had come to seem her right.

While these fresh anxieties were pricking Mrs. Stubbs with a thousand points, Captain Elyot had made up his mind to meet the worst that could befall him, and had written to his uncle of his marriage.

"Did I ever speak to you of my uncle?" he asked of Blossom,— "uncle Jeremy, off in the States, who has been a father to me?"

"Oh, how I shall love him!" Blossom exclaimed tenderly and quickly.

Captain Elyot winced. He was very much afraid that she would never have the opportunity. He did not pursue the subject; nor did he relate the story in regard to the cousin on the Jersey shore, though that had been upon his tongue. He would have hesitated, and appeared foolish enough in his own eyes, in showing to his wife that another girl (as he believed) had stood with parted lips ready to say yes to his suit. She would not have doubted it. If he had described the entire Jersey shore as lined with damsels weeping, and wringing their hands, on his account, she would have been quite ready to believe it.

He wrote his letter. He made a list of Blossom's charms and virtues with the fond imbecility of a lover, wiping it out effectually at last by avowing that she was the daughter of the former post-sutler. When this word was written, he felt that all was over between uncle Jeremy and himself. The old man was simple

enough in his tastes, and plain to homeliness in his ways, but he was an aristocrat at heart. He would be angry that his nephew had not sought the wife he had selected for him; but he would be furious over the choice he had made for himself.

As the young man folded and sealed the letter, he thought of the old house in an Eastern city where he had spent his idle days for many years now, — the one place in the world which was home to him, and where he had fancied he should end his life when he was tired of campaigning and roughing it about the world. Every part of the old place was familiar and dear to him; yet it never would be his now, he knew. It was not the palace which Mrs. Stubbs's fancy had evoked from her dreams. She would have turned from it in disdain; but it was very pleasant and dear to the young man. He could not resign it without a sigh. Yet Blossom was better than all this to him. He would not have given one day of happiness with her for the old house and all the friends he had left in that Eastern city.

"Why do you sigh?" asked Blossom as he laid his pen down, and leaned back in his chair.

"It has been a tiresome letter to write," he answered evasively. He almost regretted that he had mentioned his uncle to her. Her tender heart should never be pained by the knowledge that this letter had been a plea in her behalf.

Blossom had been married some weeks, when, one morning, her mother appeared in the doorway of her parlor.

"Come in, come in!" Blossom called out, springing up, and scattering the bright-colored wools she was sorting in her lap. "You never sit with me in these days,

though you should have nothing else to do." She pulled an arm-chair forward, and placed her mother in it.

"There's so much to be seen to!" the woman said uneasily. "Tolee grows worse and worse. I'm thinking we'll have to get rid of her some day."

"Any time you think best: it is as you say, you know," Blossom answered affectionately. "Or why not have some one to assist her? It is too much for you. You promised to be a lady when we came here," she added playfully.

But there was no answering smile on Mrs. Stubbs's face.

"I never could be that," she said quietly. It was the one subject upon which she had pondered deep and long, and had made up her mind. "It's for you to be that. You were born to it. The like o' me's fit only for rough places. But you're a lady born."

And so she was. It seemed as though some drops of gentle blood, filtered through a common enough ancestry, had come down to the girl, and made her what she was, — a being of a different order from the mother who bore her. It showed itself in her pretty soft hands whiter than milk, in the turn of the head upon which she had coiffured her hair in a fruitless effort after matronly dignity, pinning up and smoothing out the curls, like a child playing at womanhood.

"But maybe we'd best not make a change," the woman went on with affected carelessness, yet watching Blossom with crafty, half-shut eyes: "it'll only be for a little while."

The young mistress of the house had flown to the window as a horse galloped by. Its rider had doffed

his hat, and thrown a kiss from the tips of his fingers. The sun shone in warm and bright across the broad river, beyond whose sandy sweep of level edge lay the rolling prairies, already growing green. Love was a lens through which even this landscape, barren of beauty, had gained a charm. She had no desire or longing beyond.

"What will be for a little while?" she asked absently, still following with her eyes the handsome, bold rider who had not yet passed out of sight.

"That you'll be staying here. You an' the cap'n'll be movin' off t' the States some day."

"Oh! Perhaps so — when he is ordered away from here. But that will not be for a long time yet," Blossom replied, turning from the window. The rider had disappeared at last, and the scene had lost its charm. She came back, and sat down among the bright wools, passing them idly through her hands, and prattling like a child. "When we do go, I shall see aunt Julia and all the girls again. I wonder if they will think me changed. They used to call me Baby Blossom. It was only a pet name, you know. They would not think of calling me that now," she added with dignity.

"You'd never be wasting your time on such as them," the mother broke in contemptuously. "He'd have his fine friends to go to."

"And have I no fine friends?" repeated Blossom with a happy laugh. "But I am to visit them. He promised me."

The woman disdained to argue over so trifling a matter. A man's promises were easily made — and broken, she thought.

"He hears from 'em, I'll be bound," she ventured after a moment.

"From his friends? Oh, yes! and writes to them too. It was only the last mail that he sent a long letter to his uncle," Blossom ran on, innocently voluble.

"To his uncle?" The woman was alert at once. This must be the information she was seeking.

"Yes," Blossom assented slowly, laying a skein of pale corn-color beside a violet, and turning her head upon one side to watch the effect. "The uncle who has been like a father to him." It was the one item of knowledge that she possessed in regard to her husband's relatives, concerning whom she felt no curiosity, being quite happy and at rest; but she delivered it as though it had been a volume.

"And he's old, and like to die?"

"I don't know." Blossom opened her eyes in surprise.

"Yes. And, when he dies, — I've heard 'em talk it over at the store, — the cap'n'll go an' set himself up in his place."

"But we don't wish him to die," said Blossom (she was shocked at the cool indifference with which the old man was to be set aside to make room for her), — "if he is a dear old man."

"But he isn't." A jealous instinct roused a spirit of prophecy in the woman. "He's — how do I know what he is?" she added with a hard laugh; "but he's got the place that 'll come to the cap'n some day. I've heard 'em say so many a time."

"We don't want it," said Blossom softly. "We've money enough, you and I, for us all. Let him keep it, and he may live forever, poor old man." The world was wide: no one need be crowded out of it to make room for her.

In all this time while Captain Elyot's happy honeymoon was passing, no one called upon his young bride, with the exception of the chaplain's wife and Mrs. Bryce, who left her name at the door one afternoon, when she was sure that Blossom was out. As for Claudia, horses could hardly have dragged her to the house; and the other ladies at the post took their cue from headquarters, and staid away without exception. If Mrs. Stubbs fancied that the words of the clergyman pronounced over her from his book, and the bearing of a new name, would bring about a change in Blossom's social position, she was fated to disappointment. But nothing had come about as she expected; and she was too bewildered by the turn affairs had taken, and by her new position, to be, for a while, in any way affected by outside events. It was only when she had settled at last into her place in the new household, and the hours began to hang heavy upon the hands unused to ease, that she became aware of this fresh neglect. "They're set against us," the poor soul said. But her strength for resistance was waning, and she was strangely humbled in her own opinion. The idea haunted her half-crazed brain that it would be different if she were only out of the way. There was no lack of respect in Captain Elyot's manner, nor had Blossom's love been turned away from her mother by her marriage; but it would be better for them both, she had come to believe, if she were not here. Alone, Blossom might win her way, even here where she was so lightly esteemed; but she, Mrs. Stubbs herself, who would have done any thing for the child, was only a bar and a hindrance.

She planned all manner of schemes to rid them of

her,—wild impracticable schemes, which she had no courage to attempt. Would this old man never die? The summer was here already, the grass green about them, the great arched sky vividly blue overhead. The river, dark and full, slid on its way over its sandy bed. The verbenas and larkspurs in Blossom's little garden nodded scarlet and blue and pink in the sunshine. And many a heartache awoke with the flowers, as one after another of the officers at the post were ordered away into active service. Captain Elyot's turn might come any day; and then where would her hopes be? What if, after all her scheming, she should gain nothing for Blossom but a broken heart at last!

CHAPTER XX.

WHEN THE SUN SHINES ON THE MIST.

IT was early summer, and the door of the store stood wide open. In one corner, screened from the sight of passers outside, a party of men in undress uniform were gathered about a card-table: two or three idlers looked over their shoulders, among whom was Cogger the wagoner, who had just come in with an emigrant train on its way south.

The whole place had changed its appearance since Mrs. Stubbs retired to private life. There was a lack of that scrupulous neatness which displayed itself under her rule, and a greater striving after startling effects. Gaudy calicoes and gay-bordered handkerchiefs swung from perch to perch; showy horse-equipments were displayed ostentatiously; while the array of bottles upon the shelves would have done credit to a bar-room. Nor were the necessities of human life forgotten. They did not, however, push themselves disagreeably to the front, but, like the virtues, were to be had upon demand.

Cogger had bestowed upon all this display a comprehensive stare, which might or might not express admiration.

Blinkins, the new sutler, observed it with a self-satis-

fied smile. "You knew him,—this Stubbs?" he inquired.

"I did. Me an' him was as good as pardners the last time I crossed the plains."

"Good fellow enough, they say, but slow-coach," the young man apostrophized flippantly, setting his regulation cap a little more on one side.

"He warn't spry," Cogger replied slowly; "but ye'd find him thar when ye looked for him, most generally."

"Oh, yes! good fellow I don't doubt," the sutler assented glibly. "Make yourself at home, Mr.—Mr. Coggle. Look about you: maybe we can suit you with something in our line. Here's a fine pair of buckskins now." And he eyed Cogger's worn nether garments as he spoke.

But the wagoner shook his head.

"I'll take a little baccy. I never did think much o' clothes, 'cept as a kiver, not bein' much t' look at myself; but I'll bear it in mind all the same." And he returned to the players.

"What ever came of the wimmin-folks, arter Stubbs was put under, and this pooty boy took his place?" he asked, in a whisper loud enough to reach the ears of the last-named individual.

"What women-folks?" some one inquired absently.

"Stubbs's wife an' the little un."

"Where've you been, man, not to hear the news? Why, Elyot married the girl. Confounded good luck too, whatever they may say! She'll have no end of money, and"—

"Ye don't say?" And Cogger thrust himself into the group. "I reckoned it might come round; kind o' Providence in it."

"I don't know about that," returned the speaker; "but there's money enough in it. Elyot cut us all out. But there was no chance for a man: the old woman kept her pretty daughter under lock and key, and only brought her out at the end of a chain."

"Ye don't say?" Cogger was not yet over his astonishment at this happy termination of affairs. "An' they're here now?"

"They were an hour ago: I hardly think they can have strayed very far away since then."

"An' the old woman?"

"Oh! she's with 'em, a kind of providential balance."

"Ye don't say?" Cogger added for the third time. And, after a moment of silence, he addressed the sutler again: "Young man, I don't keer ef I do take a look at them buckskins."

The young man addressed hastened to bring forward the desired garments, with a running comment on their excellence as he spread them out.

Cogger held them at arm's-length while he screwed up one eye, and tried the effect of distance. Then, bringing them nearer, he tested their quality by a brisk rubbing between his fists, to the evident anxiety of the storekeeper. At last, giving the whole a shake which would have annihilated any thing of a less firm texture, he pronounced them all right. "I suppose you kin give a man the rest o' the fixin's?"

"Certainly, certainly; any thing you wish, Mr. Coggle. Just choose for yourself. I venture to say there is not such a stock this side of Independence. Perhaps you'd like to step in here and try them on;" and he threw open the door into what had been Blossom's parlor.

"What has come over Cogger?" exclaimed one of the players a little later, when the wagon-master, arrayed in his new purchase and a somewhat shopworn flannel blouse of enormous size, stood before a very small mirror, complacently surveying as much of his figure as could be reflected therein at one time.

"Going to a funeral," suggested one, at sight of the lean figure arrayed in this loose garment, which hung about his form as a flag drapes its staff on a breezeless day.

"Just look at that!" said the sutler, with a wink toward the players. "Did you ever see such a fit?" And, dexterously seizing a handful of the coat between the shoulders behind (thus drawing it into temporary shape in front), he bade Cogger look in the glass. Then, wheeling him about with a sudden grip in front, he urged him to look over his shoulder and see for himself. "Was there ever a snugger fit in the back?"

And Cogger was satisfied even to incipient vanity, especially when to these were added a new pair of boots, a gay-colored handkerchief, and a bottle of pomatum.

"I say, Cogger," broke in one of the card-players, "what's going to be done now?"

"I don't mind telling ye that I'm thinkin' o' gettin' married," the wagon-master replied, proceeding with grave deliberation to finish his toilet. "Thar's a young gal down on the Santa Fé trail I spoke to as I came along in the fall. She'll be lookin' out for me, most likely, an' I might as well be ready. Ye never kin tell what'll happen. Her name is Susannah," he added carelessly. "H'm; an' so Elyot married the little gal!"

"What blessed luck some fellows have!" burst out one of the group. "Stubbs must have left a pretty

fortune; and, as if that wasn't enough, some rich old fellow in the States, just ready to drop off, 'll leave him another pile. They say he'll throw up his commission before long."

"I happen to know something of that second story." The speaker was a new-comer fresh from the States. He glanced carefully around as he went on dealing out the cards in his hands; then he proceeded cautiously, "It may be all true enough about this Stubbs's fortune; but Elyot'll never get his uncle's money. The old man is swearing mad over his nephew's marrying the sutler's daughter."

"Hush!" whispered some one at his elbow. "There's the old woman now."

It was true. Mrs. Stubbs had come in unobserved, and stood scarcely a dozen yards from the speaker. There was a rustle of the stiff black garments as she passed out and away. She had not seen their faces; but every word had reached her ears. In one moment her castle in the air fell to ruins. Her dream of glory for the child faded like a mist touched by the sun. The old man was angry! Even Captain Elyot's fine friends had turned away from the child, and she would never be a grand lady, after all. The glare of the sinking sun dazed her eyes; the sudden shine of the river — as she turned a corner, hardly knowing whither she went, and struck out beyond the stockade — brought a deathly faintness. She could have fallen; but some instinct of will held her up till she had passed beyond the reach of curious eyes, and an angle of the rough wall screened her from sight. Here she sank down, and let the strange numbness which had seized her lock her into forgetfulness. It must have been hours before she came

to herself, before she rose up with a confused sensation of bearing a weight under which she staggered, and moved toward her new home. As she approached slowly and with difficulty, some one hanging about the corner of the house came to meet her, screened by the gathering darkness; for night was at hand.

"I hope I see ye well, ma'am," said Cogger, removing his hat, and advancing with an awkward, hesitating step.

"Eh?" There was no recognition in the eyes which looked beyond him.

"'Pears to me you ain't over civil to old friends."

The wagon-master was piqued into self-confidence.

"I ain't no friends," the woman responded in a hollow voice, each word coming laboriously from her lips. "Nobody's friends t' ye, only t' git what they kin."

"That's an awful hard sayin': if I was you, I wouldn't hold to it," replied the wagon-master confidentially. "Why, I've come t' show ye 'tain't so. Here am I, who ain't much t' look at, t' be sure; but I've been thinking about ye an' the little gal all the way along the trail. I had somethin'" — He fumbled in the pockets of his coat, and brought out a little chain, cut deftly and delicately from the bones of some animal which had fallen on the plains. "I thought p'r'aps the little gal 'ud like it, seein' her father an' me was as good as pardners."

"What is it? What do you want?" questioned the woman vacantly, letting the chain, which had cost Cogger many an hour's labor, slip through her fingers.

"It's for the little gal — for Miss Blossom. They say she's married. If you'd give it to her. 'Tain't much; but ye might wish her joy with it, an' tell her there wa'n't a link of it that didn't have her bright eyes shinin' through 'em when I was workin' at it."

The woman seemed but half to comprehend this long message ; but she raised the little bawble, and examined it absently. Then she dropped it into his hand again.

“ Why, man, she’s got ’em o’ *gold* ! ”

She brushed by him, and entered the house. She passed on to the room which Blossom had insisted upon making fine for her, and threw herself heavily upon the bed. On the wall before her was a picture, the only remaining one of Stubbs’s gallery, which she had pinned there with her own hands, fancying that the face, though high-colored and rudely drawn, bore a resemblance to Blossom. As she lay here, her mind gradually clearing, and her thoughts returning to their old channel, — the deep-cut channel from which there was now no escape, — the eyes, with a touch of sadness in them, seemed to gaze upon her continually. Turn whichever way she would, they pursued her like a reproach.

“ I did what I could for ye ! The Lord knows I tried,” she said aloud. And Blossom heard the voice, and came hastily into the room.

“ Are you ill ? ” she asked with gentle anxiety. “ Where have you been so long ? ” There were visitors in the parlor. Captain Elyot had brought a couple of friends home to tea.

“ Are they there now ? ” The woman motioned with her head towards the door.

“ Yes : they have had their tea, and are smoking their pipes together.”

Mrs. Stubbs had turned her face to the wall.

“ Go back to ’em,” she said in a hoarse voice. “ I’m best by myself, child.”

“Is it your head?” asked Blossom tenderly. “Let me bathe it.”

“No, I’m best by myself. Per’aps I’ll drop asleep.” The woman made a feint of composing herself to slumber; and Blossom kissed her, and went softly out of the room.

CHAPTER XXI.

ORDERED AWAY.

BUT Mrs. Stubbs had no thought of sleeping. There was a weight upon her brain and a fire in her veins which made quiet, restful sleep impossible, and yet there was a strange numbness stealing over her when she lay still. It dimmed her sight. The picture like Blossom's face waved and danced, and blurred to indistinctness, upon the wall before her. Was her hearing becoming dulled? She dared not lie there, lest she should float away into an unconsciousness from which there was no return. She listened for some passing sound; and a burst of merry voices came from the parlor, with a happy vibration as they died away, jarring upon her spirit. She rose heavily, and left the bed. But she would not go in to them. She could not so soon meet the man who had deceived the child and her. They would not mark her absence. They did not need her to make their happiness complete. No one in all the world needed her now. No one wanted her, if the truth were told. Only a little while ago, and her energies were strained to meet the demands upon them; and now the world seemed to move on, and she to be dropped by the way. Even her

schemes, when nothing but schemes was left to her, had come to nought. All around her were signs of a life in which she had now no part,—voices and laughter coming in at the open window, music sounding in the distance, people hurrying by. Some one passed in the twilight, gay in a sweeping gown with ribbons dangling, and a shrill laugh cutting the air. It was Claudia Bryce, with her new lover by her side. Ah! the young were easily consoled. Age and wrinkles and gray hairs, only, brought constancy, even in despair. She groped her way to the door, and stole into the open air again, fearful lest Blossom should hear her. She longed for a breath of the wind that came tearing over the prairies at times like a troop of wild horses. But the air was still and sultry to-night. Doors and windows were thrown wide open to catch the occasional breeze, cooled by its passage across the broad river. The notes of a bugle, faint and sweet, sounded from behind the barracks. There was running to and fro, cheery greetings and gossip at every corner. Was it her morbid fancy, or were these voices stilled at her approach? The door at her old home was ajar: the window of the little parlor was open; and a trollicking song came out, as if to mock her as she went by. She had been the mistress here once. She had reigned like a queen. A poor kingdom it might seem to the fine ladies about her, but all her own, and she had gloried in it. Now she was crownless, deposed. She had grasped at something beyond this, and lost all.

She wandered on. The cheerful, familiar sights and sounds which had rasped her irritated spirit were left behind. The fields of grain waved green about her; the river rolled by just beyond. There was something

soothing in the murmur of its sweeping current. For how many years had it been the undertone to her busy life! Away in the distance, brought near by the haze of twilight, plain and sky met in a debatable land of shadow. She wondered, with a dull curiosity, about the world off there, of which she knew so little. With the great, calm sky above her, and the quiet river flowing near, a measure of peace and hope returned. There might be something yet, in that unknown region from which the darkness was advancing in great strides, for the child and her, if they could but push out boldly to seek it.

And then she remembered, with a pang sharp as a pain, that the child was no longer her own to control. She had resigned her right to the girl. She had indeed lost her sceptre, and given away her crown.

She was glad, when she turned back and gained the enclosure of the fort, to find the way she had come over nearly deserted, and the night fast closing in. No one in the still darkness heeded the black figure, which seemed a part of itself as it hurried on. There was a light in the sutler's parlor, toward which her feet turned of themselves. For one brief moment she could fancy that the old days had come again. Once more she saw the room half full of smoke, the round table drawn up close to the fire, where waited an impatient, familiar group. What kept the mistress so long away? Some one sang a noisy song to beguile the time. The refrain came to her ears with the tap of heels upon the floor. Her hand was thrust out for the latch. Then she came to herself, and shrank back from the door. Dead and gone! The forms she had called up in her vision had turned to dust and ashes years before. What was she but a ghost of the former mistress of the place?

She hurried on home. Home!—it was no home to her. But she crept into the house unobserved, and to bed. There was silence in the parlor, out from which the merry voices had come only an hour before. The visitors had departed, and Blossom would come presently to see if she still slept. She composed her limbs, and even controlled her quick, panting breath, as the girl's step sounded outside the door; and Blossom, having peeped in, stole away again.

Then alone in the darkness she tried to think it out,—to plan her future and the child's. She had never been one to grasp at another hand for strength. She had stood alone fearless, self-helped; but now, in the darkness and in the feebleness of her spirit, she would have sought a friend. But there was none,—no one who could enter in any degree into her hopes, or be made to feel her despair. Cogger's plain face, with its shrewd blinking eyes, rose before her unbidden. But she put it aside. What could he know of her ambition for the child? He would only range himself with Captain Elyot and "the rest of 'em," she thought bitterly. No, she must fight alone; for fight she would. The life she had been leading the past few months was galling enough, even with hope to lend her patience. It would be beyond endurance now. Oh, if she had only held out against the young man! If she had but barred the door in his face, instead of urging on the intimacy which had ended in Blossom's marriage! If she had only been firm at the last! She herself had made the net in which Blossom's feet were snared. But for this, they might have gone away,—they two; and somewhere, even though at the ends of the earth, in some distant city where they were unknown, the money

which went for nothing here would have bought position, favor, every thing, for the child.

The moon, straggling up the sky, sent a long, slanting ray, like a ghostly finger, into the room where the woman lay tossing upon her uneasy bed. It touched the face upon the wall so like Blossom's. Oh, how could any one turn against the child! Perhaps it was not true, after all. It might be that this stranger was mistaken. The gossip of a garrison had taught her that rumor was two-faced. No disturbing news had reached Blossom, or she would have shared it with her mother before now; and Captain Elyot seemed happy and at ease. How could he be, if this were true? Still, if this old man so far away had looked with favor upon the marriage, there should have come a letter from him before now. And Blossom had assured her that there was none. What if one had come; and the young man, unwilling to let the truth be known, had concealed it from the child? She rose from the bed again, and by the light of the moon made her way across the narrow passage, to the parlor-door, which opened noiselessly at her touch. It was but a step, in the dim light, to the corner where Captain Elyot's writing-case lay closed and locked upon a table. She held her breath as she took it in her arms, lest she should awaken the sleepers in the next room; but no alarm disturbed her as she retreated swiftly. She shut the door, and fastened it carefully after her. Then lighting a candle, and drawing the curtain of her narrow window, she prepared to search the contents of the desk. A bunch of keys that had tried every unyielding lock at the post was among the odds and ends reserved from the final disposal of the stock at the store. These she brought out,

testing each one patiently, until at last the lock sprang back, and the lid opened. She turned the papers over cautiously, careful not to disturb their order, seeking, she hardly knew by what token, this letter which Blossom, in reply to her inquiries, assured her had never arrived. But Blossom might easily be deceived: she would know for herself. It was no easy task, with nothing to guide her. She might have spent hours in the search, but that a crumpled letter, evidently tossed in carelessly, and buried under a weight of more neatly arranged papers, caught her eye. Expecting nothing, for it was old and worn in appearance, yet moved to open it, she took it from its envelope, and was struck at once by the first words, "Nephew Robert." This must be what she sought. She turned hastily to the conclusion; but the signature was illegible, and then she remembered that she had never asked the name of this old man in whom she felt so keen an interest. She deciphered the date at the beginning of the sheet, and found, to her disappointment, that it was written months before Blossom's marriage. Still some fascination held her eyes to the crooked, blurred lines; and she began to read. It was the letter received months before his marriage, urging Captain Elyot to write to the cousin down on the Jersey shore. The tone was one of reproach as well as menace; and the inference gathered by the woman, who spelled the words out slowly one by one, was, that the young man owed allegiance to this cousin. She held the letter long in her hands, gazing at the words which seemed to conceal so much. So he was false as well as fickle! How long would it be before he wearied of the child? She had nearly replaced the contents of the desk, when she remembered

that she had not yet found the letter for which she had been searching. But she looked in vain, and with less interest now. Blossom was right, no doubt. Captain Elyot's uncle had never written. It was as the stranger at the store had said, — the old man was angry. Captain Elyot's grand friends had turned against him! Oh, what a fool she had been! She said it to herself, crumpling the letter in her hand as the young man had done, and feeling her heart grow like a stone toward him. East and west, wherever he went, he had gained the love of some woman, only to cast it aside, she said to herself. It was no triumph that Blossom had won him at last. Her day, too, would be brief. He had given up this cousin for the child, — this cousin to whom he was promised, without doubt, — but he had known all the time that Blossom's inheritance would be his, and it was for this he had pursued her. And she had helped it on! Her very opposition and harsh words had brought it about at last. She sat, with her elbows upon the desk, holding her poor, dazed head in her hands, until the waning light in the room warned her to replace it, and conceal her discovery; for she would not act hastily. A judgment had come upon her for her rashness, and she would take warning now from the past. The floor creaked under her feet as she crossed the parlor: the heavy desk slipped from her hand as she tried to set it down. A quick, sharp voice called out as she stood still, with the darkness about her paling to the gray of early morning. The click of a pistol followed. Would he shoot her like a thief? It would be of a piece with the rest, she thought swiftly. The blood tingled in her veins, but not with fear, as she stood grim and silent, with a sudden wild desire

for this to come and end it all, thrilling her through and through. Then every thing was still again; and she crept away, to lie on her bed in the dawning light, and try to plan out the future.

Does an angel with a flaming sword stand always in the way to turn us back from our evil purposes? I think not: more often the road seems to open; and opportunity makes the path to destruction smooth and swift to our feet.

The time slid by to Blossom, who knew that these happy days might come to a sudden end, from the succession of changes in the garrison, as summer drew near. Jagged days they were to Mrs. Stubbs, moodily biding her time, and giving little heed apparently to outward events. As summer approached, preparations were made for a general movement against the Indians, who had gathered in great force along the Smoky Hill, becoming more and more troublesome as the season advanced. Lieutenant Orme had never returned to the post; and one after another the officers, with their commands, were drawn away, until barely a sufficient number of men to guard the fort was left. Captain Elyot's turn came at last.

With scarcely men enough to garrison the post, and their enemies strengthening around them, it was found necessary to communicate with some of the more northern forts. Orders from headquarters finally rendered this imperative.

Captain Elyot and Lieutenant Gibbs were the only officers who could be spared; and upon them fell this dangerous service. With a small body of men and a couple of scouts, they were to make their way — through what was, much of the distance, an ambushed wilder-

ness — to the Platte River; neither the first time nor the last that a force too large to conceal its movements, and too small to defend itself, has been sent into the very heart of the Indian country.

“Be a brave girl,” said Captain Elyot to his wife, though his own cheek paled with the news he brought. “You knew that this must come when you promised to be a soldier’s wife.”

But Blossom had fainted away in his arms.

There was little time for preparation: there was even less for adieus. He strained the lifeless form to his breast; then, not daring to linger, lest his courage should give way, hastily gave her into Mrs. Stubbs’s arms, too greatly agitated to observe the strange excitement which seemed to pervade the woman as she bore her daughter off, and laid her upon her bed. But, when Blossom’s face touched the pillow, she came to herself with a moan. It drew her husband back to her, — that feeble sound like a wail. He threw himself upon his knees beside the bed, and laid his face against hers. Through the open window came peaceful, droning, summer sounds, mingled with the sobs of some soldier’s wife and the trampling of uneasy hoofs. Already the little company who were to march had gathered. The women had run out, and every idler drawn near to see them ride away.

“Don’t, child; don’t grieve so. I shall come back to you. Do you hear me, Blossom?”

The bugle sounded “To horse!” He kissed her passionately.

“Remember,” he said to her mother, who took his place beside the bed, “*I shall come back.*” Then he was gone.

His foot was in the stirrup when a tottering figure

came out of the doorway. It was Blossom, her dress in disorder, her hair falling over her shoulders, her face white as death. She threw her arms about his neck before them all.

“For God’s sake don’t, or I can never go!” he said, with a sob like a groan, his face as white as her own.

It was the major himself who took her in his arms, and carried her into the house. And no one looked after the poor young wife with scorn to-day. Even the women gave her a tear.

Another good-by had been said that morning, at the major’s, between Claudia and Lieutenant Gibbs, who was her accepted lover now; for Claudia had determined to make hay while the sun shone, knowing full well that that luminary was on its decline for her. It was not, perhaps, the best of hay, though some there are who affirm the aftermath to be sweetest. Claudia was not of this opinion. But at least it was better than none; and so she gathered it in with some haste and dexterity, not knowing what storms might arise.

There were tears in the lieutenant’s eyes as he took her bloodless hands in his.

“You won’t forget me? Some of these men coming and going are sure to fall in love with you; but Claudia” —

“How silly to think of such a thing, when you know we are engaged!” replied Claudia, with practical wisdom, and trying to release the hands which the poor fellow was crushing in his own.

“I suppose I am a fool,” the man said, swallowing something which rose in his throat, “though a fellow don’t like to be reminded of it. But you see, Claudia, I never wanted any other girl; and — and I used to feel

as if I could shoot Elyot when he was coming here. But you didn't care for him?"

Did Claudia feel a tightening at her own throat which sent the color into her face?

"Why do you ask me that over and over again?" she said irritably.

"Because I'm a fool, I suppose." And the man laughed an uneasy laugh. "But just once more, Claudia. I'm going away, you know, and maybe — you liked me better all the while, didn't you?"

"Why, of course," said poor Claudia, thus driven to the wall.

"I knew you did. Only I wish you wouldn't say 'of course.' And you're sorry I'm going? I'm such a confounded fool!" burst out the poor fellow, turning abruptly away, and staring out at the window.

"To be sure I am sorry," said Claudia, softening. Had she gone too far in her impatience? But why would he persist in irritating her? She laid her hand upon his arm. It was the hand with his ring upon it, and it showed very white against the dark-blue sleeve. She could but notice how very becoming the ring was with its handsome stone. The lieutenant, as well as Captain Elyot, had some expectations. His were not at all to be compared with those of the latter, — which, to do Claudia justice, had not weighed as a feather with the girl, — but they were by no means to be despised.

"How can you ask if I am sorry?" and her voice was reproachful, if not tender. "If any harm should come to you, I don't know what I should do." Nor did she indeed. "And if you don't let me hear from you when the scout comes back from Fort Wallace" —

"I will; you may be sure I will."

And then the bugle which had called Captain Elyot away sounded for this lover also. He could have taken the girl in his arms at this last moment, but that her calmness chilled him. She held up her face dutifully to be kissed. The young man swallowed a sigh, which was half a sob, as he turned away from her. He had gained what he had long desired. Claudia was his. But perhaps all apples have a taste of ashes at the core. "It is her way," he said; but he mounted his horse with something very like a stone for a heart. He looked back as he rode slowly by with the troops. The women had all run out of open doors. A sudden shower darkened the sky, and fell in great plashing drops, like tears held back long. They wet more than one uncovered head; but Claudia had gone in prudently out of the rain, and the house was blank and voiceless when the lieutenant rode out with the rest.

CHAPTER XXII.

THROUGH THE WILDERNESS.

MIDSUMMER had spread its net of coarse, tufted grasses, already growing yellow under a scorching sun. The streams had shrunk away to half their size, the lesser ones reduced to bare, dry skeletons stretched upon the sand. Day after day a cloudless sky arched the plains—a dead blue over Fort Atchison, where no tidings of Captain Elyot's party had been received, though six weeks had passed since they set off toward the north. But it was not unreasonable to suppose that they might have been detained at Fort Harkness, their destination on the Platte, or ordered upon duty in some other direction. Since nothing good or ill was really known of them, but little anxiety was expressed in words as yet; though many a shake of the head followed any reference to the men who rode away under a cloudy sky, and with the rain falling upon them.

"T'was an ill omen," Sergeant McDougal said confidentially to Mrs. Bryce's Jinny.

In spite of his diminutive size, the sergeant presented a terrible appearance, with his bold, gruff manner, and great, bushy brows, which almost met above his sharp gray eyes. But they smoothed themselves out in a won-

derful way, and he touched his cap almost gallantly as Blossom tripped past the two, bound on some errand to the store.

“Her’s a neat one,” the sergeant ejaculated admiringly, as his eyes followed the pretty figure in its tasteful gown. But to this tribute of admiration was added an ominous shake of the head.

Every one at the post, by this time, held his or her own secret belief as to the fate of the missing party. Major Bryce had presented an untroubled front to the world, which knew nothing as to the nature of the despatches forwarded by Captain Elyot; but he could not hide his anxiety from the wife of his bosom, nor she from Claudia. The major was irritable — outrageous, as Claudia described it — in his own family.

“And no wonder!” said Mrs. Bryce to Claudia, who, herself vexed and harassed by fears, had declared life under the present circumstances to be unbearable. “He may well be ill-tempered, when he scarcely sleeps an hour of the night.”

And Claudia could easily believe this, since in her own hours of wakefulness, more frequent than she would have cared to acknowledge, she had heard him, through the thin partitions, groaning and tossing upon his bed. Even to his wife he had not yet confessed that a certain combination of forces which was to be expected through the delivery of these despatches had never been brought about. What, then, had become of these men whom he sent out? “God knows,” he said to himself in answer to the question arising every hour of the day and night. Each arrival at the post, every straggling party of Indians professing friendship, and drawing near the fort to beg or steal, was closely

questioned, but without result. The sight of Blossom's troubled face annoyed him. He turned short about in his steps when she or Mrs. Stubbs appeared, and would have avoided his own daughter if it had been possible. Since it was not, he bristled with ill-humor, which kept her at a distance.

But Claudia was not disposed to question him. She could read without a book; and she saw her own desirable prospects connected a second time with Captain Elyot's fate, and again fading away. It was not strange that she became more thin and unattractive than ever. Her toilet, Miss Bryce's strong point, was neglected: the very grace of her manner seemed to depart. Poor Claudia! Disappointment was her fate, she thought bitterly. She had been born under an evil star. And she might have been happy, yes, and amiable—for she was well aware of her ill-temper, which appeared to her to be not without a cause—if only matters had come about as she had wished. Even her prospective marriage with Lieutenant Gibbs, which had seemed very little to rejoice over, began to show most desirable features, now that it had become a matter of doubt. If she failed in this, there was nothing more to hope for. Perhaps it was anxiety, the anxiety which other women felt whose lovers were long absent and in the midst of danger, which so broke down her spirit. She tried to believe it was this, and to take some comfort in the reflection. But, whatever else she might be, the girl was not wilfully self-deceptive, and she knew that she thought of the lieutenant with no agonized tenderness. The agony was for herself, who was to suffer defeat. And she had no reserve of hope or happiness on some high plain beyond this conflict.

As Blossom came back from the store, she met Miss Bryce face to face. Though the interests of these two were so closely tied together just now, it had not placed them upon a more friendly footing. They had never exchanged a word beyond that of ordinary greeting, very distant and haughty upon one side, when they chanced to meet, as now. As Claudia saw Captain Elyot's wife approaching hurriedly, almost as if to intercept her, carefully dressed as though there were no days of tearful waiting, no agony of disappointment in store for her, her heart hardened more than ever toward the girl. She hated her for her pretty, dimpled face, which had lost much of its fresh color in these weeks of waiting for her husband's return, though Blossom had felt scarcely any apprehension of danger to him, so carefully had her mother guarded her from the baleful surmises and reports flying about the small garrison. As she came on, with the rude, weather-stained barracks behind her to set off her neat figure, Miss Bryce marked with a disapproval mingled with scorn, the fresh though unadorned dress—something sheer and white, with bunches of thistles scattered over its surface—in which Blossom was arrayed. She, the major's daughter, had not decked herself out in fine clothes while her lover was—no one knew where. And, indeed, Miss Bryce's gown was both limp and frayed at the edge. She became all at once angrily aware of this fact as she essayed to pass the younger woman without a word. But Blossom stood directly in her path, as though she would address her.

"I beg your pardon," she began timidly; "but I thought you would not mind telling me the truth. Every one avoids me: no one will answer me when I

ask. But you will tell me—is it not time to hear from them? Ought they not to have come back before now?”

Claudia gazed upon the distressed face, reddening and paling under her cold stare. Oh! how she could make this little thing's heart ache if she chose! and with the truth too. For it was indeed time that the scouts, if no one else, should have worked their way back; and there was every thing to fear, every dreadful news to expect, she knew only too well. And why should this girl not be told? Who was she, that it should be kept from her, while Claudia herself must be torn with fears?

“Why do you ask me?” she said in a sharp voice. She could not bring herself to utter the cruel words. “How should I know any thing about them?”

“Oh! but you do know. Dear Miss Bryce, do not be angry, or afraid that I cannot bear it. I am not a child any longer. You have heard something. I can see it in your face.” The color had entirely vanished from Blossom's cheeks.

“I have heard nothing at all,” Claudia said in a harsh voice, her own distress rising to angry impatience at the sight of Blossom's woe. “Nobody has heard any thing.” And then, as the young wife's detaining hand fell away from her sleeve, she passed on with her burden of jealous, wrathful misery, leaving Blossom to bear her own apprehensions as best she might.

But while these days of uncertainty and foreboding were moving on slowly at the fort, how had it fared with the little company of men who rode away one summer morning toward the north?

If the sun shines fiercely down upon Fort Atchison

in this midsummer time, it pours with a still more torrid heat upon that portion of the sage-brush country, away to the north and east of this post, where, one August morning, a solitary man staggers feebly on over the treacherous ground. He is tattered and unkempt. He is worn to a skeleton. His bare, torn feet leave prints of blood at every feeble step. Ah, Blossom! could you see him now, your pale cheeks would be paler yet, your young heart would break for sorrow. He struggles forward, climbing the ridge of land which seems to bar the north, gaining the crest of the hill upon his hands and knees, only to burst into weak tears as he sinks back at the prospect disclosed. The north-west wind has brought a sickening odor he knows only too well; while away in the distance a desert of sage-brush stretches out before him, a wilderness of desolation; and, as if to mock him, against the distant horizon, like a promise never to be fulfilled, the very air shines and ripples, and sparkles like water, — a mirage he has pursued too many days already to be deceived by it now.

Why follow each step of exhaustion, of pain, of loss of reason at last? There were days of feverish wanderings; there were nights of delirious dreams. And through it all, strange though it be to tell, a voice in his ear urged him on continually, a hand by his side pointed ever to the north. What held the feeble thread of life unbroken? It may be that the very reptiles of the earth were his food. There came a time when they mingled with his-insane fancies; they swarmed about his feet; they writhed upon the ground, — which had all at once changed to a carpet of flowers, scarlet and green and yellow, — turning into glistening swords as he approached, and piercing his bleeding

feet. But he nourished himself upon the juicy spines of the cacti which had wounded him; and, when these failed, he must have died, if the rainy season had not set in.

One night, lying half conscious under the stars, their light became suddenly obscured. The earth beneath him trembled; the heavens above him were rent; and the angry voice of God seemed to come forth. He thought the last dreadful day had arrived. After death, the judgment! and his throbbing heart stood still while he waited for his summons.

Then, like words of forgiveness unexpectedly following wrong-doing, like dews of mercy gently falling, came trickling drops upon his face; and at last, with a mighty, rushing wind, the blessed rain fell. It cooled the fevered body; it quenched the fire upon the parched tongue, and, drenching the ground (baked like no potter's ware), formed pools in its dry hollows. He scooped it up with his trembling hands, and drank. He played with it, letting the drops trickle from his fingers, and laughing aloud. He plunged his hot face into it, and, stretching himself out upon the drenched earth, slept the sleep of a child, and awoke himself again. The sun shone high over his head, but no longer burned into his brain. The air was fresh and cool. The deathly odor which he remembered so well was gone. He looked about him bewildered. The sage-brush had disappeared. The whole face of the country was changed. He seemed to lie in some sheltered valley, green after the rain, with the hue of early summer. A clump of willows grew at a little distance. He could see the sky, drifted over with soft white clouds, through the delicate waving branches. No bird broke the stillness; but the trickle

of running water, where some stream had been newly fed by the rain, sounded with delightful monotony in his ear. He was weak as an infant, but filled with a wonderful content. He slept, and woke again. The sun had shaken itself free from the clouds, its warm beams had dried his tattered garments. He crawled to the stream, and drank, — a miraculous thread of water, with its faint gurgle, which a day would dry away again. How he blessed it! But the long dry season was over now; and if he had, as he was inclined to believe, kept to a northerly direction through all his delirious wanderings, crossing the beds of sunken streams, and making his way among the bewildering buffalo-trails, deliverance and the Platte could not be far away. Then he remembered that he had neither food nor ammunition. Already hunger took hold of him, and with hunger came despair.

Oh, to die now, with the end so near! To fail at last, when even the fever of delirium had borne him on toward the fulfilment of his purpose! He still carried the despatches which he had been commissioned to bear. They were worthless long before this; but his duty to deliver them was the same. To die with this almost accomplished, and with no one to carry a last word to the wife waiting for him! Death would be dreadful enough at best, — with Blossom's hand in his, and Blossom's dear face upon which to rest his eyes last of all. But to die alone, and in this wilderness! And then it came to him, that, doubtless long before now, his wife had ceased to expect him. To her he must be already as one dead. It might be that some story of the attack and massacre of their little party would find its way back to Fort Atchison; and she would believe that he had fallen

with the rest. It was not possible that any one beside himself had escaped, — and he only to perish of hunger at last ! But he would not die without an effort. And he staggered upon his feet, and moved feebly forward. All was indeed changed. The ridges above him were tufted with ash and walnut and cotton-wood. While he gazed, a herd of antelopes swept by, their white tails fluttering like pennons in the wind. Involuntarily he put his hand to his breast ; but his revolver was useless, even if his hand could have held it steadily to the mark.

But he was not to die here. He had not made his way through the wilderness to perish in the midst of plenty. Toward night, as he crept out of a thicket of walnut, struggling at every step against the deathly faintness which threatened to overpower him, he came all at once upon a deserted Indian camp. It thrilled him with terror to find that the ashes of the fire were hardly yet cold. But hunger was stronger than fear ; and the half-devoured carcass of an elk, left behind from some sudden alarm, or improvidence in the midst of plenty, banished all fear of starvation. There was enough for present need and to provision days to come, — more than enough ; for his stomach at first refused to retain the unaccustomed food. He slaked his thirst at a little stream flowing out, with many a gurgle, from the thicket close by, and, trembling and weak, crawled into its depths to sleep till another dawn reddened the land, and even found him out in his hiding-place.

It would seem as if all difficulties were removed now. Frequent showers were beginning to fill the dry beds of the streams. He had but to regain the appetite which had preyed upon him when he had nothing with which to satisfy it, and had utterly deserted him now, so that

the very thought of the food he carried was nauseating, — only this, and to push on toward the river. But dreadful cramps seized him continually, leaving him more exhausted than ever after each attack; and, as these gradually passed away, new and forgotten dangers awoke. Often the trail of unshod ponies met his eyes, or the smoke of a distant camp-fire aroused both hopes and fears, neither of which he dared put to the test after the first attempt, when, as he approached cautiously, the barking of dogs and whinnying of Indian ponies warned him away. Once even, at nightfall, an Indian sentinel, gay with vermilion and red ochre, started out upon the crest of a bluff above him. He dropped to the ground, quaking with fear, to lie motionless, until, in the deeper shadows of night, he could retrace his steps, and, by a wide *détour*, avoid the spot.

All manner of long-neglected precautions were taken up again. Life grew dearer every moment. Neither eye nor ear slept at its post as his impatience urged him on far beyond his strength. Choosing the most worn among the buffalo-trails leading in and out in the midst of the more and more broken land; swimming or wading the streams (already made formidable by the rains) with a fierce energy which left him exhausted, and unable to move for long hours afterward; skulking behind trees at some sudden alarm, or lying concealed in the bushy grass overlooking some deep ravine, scorched by the mid-day sun, and chilled by the night-air (icy as though from a glacier); often drenched by fierce rains, and even delirious again with fever, — he was always pushing on, with a spirit which far outstripped the poor shackling body. The “breaks” were lessening fast. Days before, he must have passed the “divide.” The hills were sink-

ing toward the river. The river! It was every thing, — life, home, Blossom! But it must yet be miles away, — torturous miles. Would his poor strength hold out?

It was late in the afternoon: he watched the declining sun with only a dread of the chill the night would bring — nothing more. No hope for the morrow could arouse his imagination; no fear of death even disturbed him. His compass had made his way straight as a line; but necessity had curved it like the windings of a stream. He began the steep ascent of a hill, clutching the tufted grass with his hands, with no desire for what lay beyond stirring his blood, as, after repeated and painful efforts, he gained the summit. It was sprinkled over with alders, waving gently before the rising breeze. The sun was dropping out of sight over the crest of a distant peak; but its ruddy fire warmed all the sky, faintly flushing the nearer hills even, while hollow and valley lay darkened between. The poor toiler lay panting upon the grass. The wind, rising more and more, caught his torn garments, and seemed to chill his very bones. Oh, how cruelly cold would the night be! He must try to crawl a little farther, to a more sheltered spot. He rose upon his feet, and turned toward the landscape over which his weary way must pass for many a day yet. There was no eagerness, there was not even curiosity, in this dull gaze. He had toiled painfully up many a steep place the past few days, only to find the land scooped out before him, and other “breaks” rising like a very procession of hills beyond. He pushed the tangled hair away from his bloodshot eyes. Then he gazed as though the heavens had opened before him. For there, spread out to his bewildered vision, green as the borders of the rivers of the promised land, lay the valley of the Platte, with the

shimmer of its waters in the distance, and its islands fringed with trees. He ran, forgetting his poor, maimed feet. He threw up his arms, and shouted, careless of who might hear the feeble cry, and then — he fell upon his knees, and wept like a child.

But, his heart once relieved, he could not rest here, with the blessed goal so near. Though he staggered like a drunken man, he rose, and hastened on. The grass snared his feet. More than once he fell; but he struggled up to run again. He was going away from Blossom; yet every step brought him nearer to her.

Darkness still found him hastening toward the river, which eluded him as he went on. Sometimes it was hidden from sight; but the next rise of land brought it in view again, — a silvery, waving line as the sun faded out in the west. He threw himself upon the ground to sleep; but there was no sleep for him. The water seemed to ripple and sparkle and beckon him on, the trees upon the bank to nod and wave in the night-wind; and under the rising moon he rose, and dragged himself forward again. It was only when he had struck the broad, well-beaten trail which followed the course of the river, and, twenty years ago, bound East and West together like a chain, that Nature demanded her own at last, and he slept.

A wagon-train met him before noon the next day, as he was limping along the trail toward the east, uncertain if this were the course he should pursue. The party gave him food, and would have heard his story; but, when he learned that Fort Harkness was only five miles away, his demon of impatience spurred him on again.

The dust blinded his eyes. The old dreaded dizzi-

ness came back to his head. The coarse shoes which some kind-hearted teamster had taken from his own feet to force upon him only tortured him afresh. He threw them off, and limped on in his naked, swollen feet. More than once he dropped by the way, with Blossom's name upon his lips, and the thought in his heart that he should never rise again; and it was almost night when he approached the stockade of the fort at last.

A party of young officers on horseback, curvetting and careering over the grassy slope before the gate, saw this strange figure drawing near.

"Good God! Who comes here?" exclaimed one.

"Show me the officer in command," he said, in a voice which sounded strange and hollow in his own ears, as they gathered round him. The group parted; and a man of spare figure, with long, fair hair flowing over his shoulders, came riding to the front. Then Captain Elyot made one last mighty effort. Drawing his wasted figure with difficulty to an erect position, he gave the military salute. "I—I am—the bearer of despatches," he said, with a quaver in his voice. He pulled from his bosom the worn papers he had carried so long, and gave them with a steady hand to the commanding officer. Then he fell to the ground unconscious.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE BORDERS OF AN INVISIBLE LAND.

HERE, some of you pick the poor fellow up," said the colonel, turning his horse, and carelessly opening the papers put into his hand, by no means sure that he was not imposed upon by some witless straggler. But, at the heading of the first, he exclaimed, "Fort Atchison? And dated more than two months back?" Then, reading on hurriedly, "Can these be the missing despatches sent by Elyot's party? Good Heavens! Could that have been one of them?" And, putting spurs to his horse, he dashed into the fort to find the stranger already in the hands of the surgeon, and raving with fever. But he was a stranger no longer. A bath, and the removal of the tangled hair and beard established his identity beyond question. It was Captain Elyot himself, preserved alive as by a miracle, escaped, no one could tell how, when all of his party, with the exception of two who had regained Fort Atchison, were believed to have been overcome and killed by the Indians. A messenger from Fort Wallace, some weeks before, had brought the news: they had been surprised by a band of Sioux. Lieutenant Gibbs and one of the scouts only had escaped, and

after weeks of lying concealed, and wandering in the midst of peril, had found their way back to Fort Atchison. The scout asserted positively that he had seen Captain Elyot fall; and the young man was therefore given up for dead. To behold him now, even in his present wasted, pitiable condition, was like receiving one from the grave. All that could add to his comfort or lessen his sufferings was eagerly proffered by the men about him; but, in the strange land where his mind still wandered, friends could not reach him, and sympathy was of no avail. From the ravings of his fever they gathered some knowledge of his past sufferings. Again he seemed to live that dreadful time, and with an agony a thousand-fold increased, since it had found expression at last.

It was useless to think of sending tidings of his escape to Fort Atchison. The combined action of the troops, through the failure of this attempt to communicate with Fort Harkness, had been temporarily abandoned. The whole country between the two posts swarmed with Indians, among whom no small party could safely make its way. Added to this, the forces at the fort had been heavily drawn upon from the north; and there remained nothing to be done but to await their return and the restoration of reason and strength to Captain Elyot, if, indeed, these were ever to be his again.

For a long month fever and delirium held possession of him. Then he awoke from a heavy sleep, with his own soul looking out of his troubled eyes.

"Where?" he whispered feebly, perplexed by the strangeness about him.

They told him.

"What day?"

"Monday."

"No, no! What *day*?" anxiously.

There was no woman's instinct to catch his meaning. The men looked at one another.

"The day of the month," suggested some one at a venture. The young man's eager eyes seized upon the speaker. Yes: they understood him at last.

"The fourth of October."

He groaned aloud. It was the second day of July when he had kissed Blossom good-by. And did she expect him still? The words he would speak eluded him. But the agony of effort sent great drops of perspiration down his forehead. None of them knew what he would ask. They feared the excitement of awakening in a strange place had sent his wits to wandering again.

"Yes, yes. Go to sleep, there's a good fellow," said some one soothingly.

But still the hollow eyes implored. The link between reason and speech was gone. Yet he struggled to ask this question.

"It is his wife: he is trying to ask about his wife," said the first speaker, who had so successfully interpreted his former distress. The man was a dull young fellow on ordinary occasions, with no mental parts to speak of; but he had a wife of his own at Laramie, and the tightening of a stretched cord made him acute for once.

The colonel came forward, and took Captain Elyot's wasted hand in his own.

"Is it news from Atchison you want? My dear fellow, don't look so distressed: we have no ill news

for you. A scout from Fort Wallace, ten days ago, reported all well there and at Atchison. He carried back the tidings of your escape. So you have only to recover now, having taken a good step in that direction already, thanks to Surgeon Camp and half a score of nurses."

The anxious face upon the pillow settled into an expression of peace. If this was not what he desired, the young man was too weak to comprehend the difference. Blossom was well. With that assurance his feeble understanding was content. The process of reasoning, of joining the broken threads in memory only bewildered him. The line between the real and unreal had been swept away. He would let it all go for the present. Unconsciously he slipped into forgetfulness and sleep again.

He began to gain from this time. A couple of weeks found him able to sit up, and relate, as best he could, the story of his escape,—a broken story and brief, with great gaps of forgetfulness through it all,—a story broken into fragments of recollection, and ending in a burst of sobs he was too weak to repress, over the fate of his companions. But his eagerness to return to Fort Atchison was aroused anew by this attempt at a recital of the perils he had passed through since leaving the post. He would have set off at once, and alone. He would have faced the wilderness again, if necessary, in his wild desire to return; but the colonel, wiser than he, laid the command of patience upon him. In two or three weeks, at farthest, the forces north of the river would sweep south. He should go with them, if strong enough by that time to sit a horse. But days of waiting have a drag on their wheels. His impatience

grew with his strength, and overcame it at last. He received no word from Blossom, no letter, though another scanty mail was brought through from the south by a scout. Was she alive and well? The man knew nothing. He had only come from Fort Wallace, where he had picked up these letters, and brought them on.

One night the fever seized him again, feebly to be sure, but with sufficient strength to prove itself still a dangerous foe.

"This will never do," said the colonel, entering his room in the morning to find him weak and nerveless. "Nothing but the air of Atchison will set you up, I see. Can you bear good news, Elyot? I have arranged for you to start at once."

"At once?" Captain Elyot turned his face to the wall, ashamed of the tears he could not keep back. "You forget. It might have been possible a week ago," he added, with a touch of bitterness in his quavering voice.

"But are you sure it is impossible now?" the colonel went on cheerfully, too generous to weakness to admit the sting of the last words. "You shall have the best ambulance at the post, and, to crown all, my orderly for an attendant: a capital nurse he is too. You have tried him already. I forgot to mention the mules; but they shall be as stout a pair as we can show."

"Mules? ambulance?" murmured Captain Elyot.

"Yes, to be sure! My poor fellow, how did you think you were to travel? Even if the troops were to come in to-night, you could not join them; nor has there been a day since you dropped down upon us when you could have mounted a horse. There has been a deal of fever in your strength, even since you

began to gain. Don't shake your head. The surgeon warned me last week of this. Your pulse has kept up obstinately. But now, after a quiet day or two, he thinks you will improve more rapidly to be on the march.—Is it not so?" the colonel added, to the little, bristling post-surgeon, who came with a brisk, professional air into the room at the moment.

"Yes, yes, to be sure!—We shall turn you out at short notice," laughed Dr. Camp, taking the colonel's place, and laying his fingers upon the thin wrist, almost as colorless as the sheet beneath it. "H'm;" after a moment of silence, nodding his head with an air of satisfaction. "To-morrow, perhaps. We must take advantage of this mild weather; and I should not mind making one of the party for the first fifty miles or less. A canter of two or three days would suit me exactly. I'm getting a little stout, I fancy. Eh, Elyot?" And the little man buttoned his coat with a pretence of extreme difficulty about his round figure.

"I was going to suggest the same, and will manage to spare you an escort," the colonel said with alacrity. "Blake will be in within thirty-six hours. I may as well give you your orders now, Elyot. You are to proceed straight east to Council Bluffs, from which place you will descend the river to Independence. There, I hope you will be able to dismiss your caravan, if not, indeed, at Council Bluffs; and you will join the first train bound for the Arkansas River, and report to Major Bryce at the earliest date possible; though I will not lay my commands upon you to the extent of insisting upon this," he added with a laugh.

But Captain Elyot's countenance expressed more con-

sternation than pleasure at the long route arranged for him.

The colonel looked with a pity which held no reproach upon the wasted figure, hardly able to turn itself feebly in the bed.

“My good fellow, you still think you might cross the country, I see. A month hence, you will thank me for putting you out of danger, and into the way to health, I hope. But, whether you bless or blame,” he added quietly, “my responsibility is the same. I hope, to-morrow morning at this time, to be wishing you a successful journey, Captain Elyot.” And he left the room.

Whether the fever had really spent itself at last, or the prospect of setting off had calmed the troubled spirit of the sick man, certain it is he passed a quiet night of restful sleep, and was pronounced in a condition to be moved the next morning. Surgeon Camp broke short the ordeal of leave-taking, and, assuming entire direction of the principal portion of the small cavalcade, — the ambulance and its immediate attendants, — succeeded in conveying it from the fort without overwhelming bustle or excitement.

It was well for Captain Elyot that his journey began as it did; for, easy as it had been made for him, his strength gave out more than once during the first day or two; and even the energetic little surgeon, who rode always by his side, feared the attempt had been premature. He would have turned the heads of the mules toward the fort again; but, at this suggestion, Captain Elyot evinced an excitement and dread more alarming even than prostration. So they went on, by slow stages, with many a pause to rest, the life of the sick man

ebbing almost away at times, but with every flood gaining a little, — so little that day after day seemed to bring no change, save that the face became more haggard and weary, the eye more sunken and dim. But the energetic little surgeon rubbed his hands more briskly after each study of the irregular pulse. He fed his patient with nourishing soups and jellies, — a teaspoonful, a drop, the wetting of his lips, if he could do no more. He fastened the curtain of the ambulance back, and let the air — clear and dry as midsummer, bracing as old wine — touch his forehead, and lift his hair. And he won his reward. God allows us to be dragged back from the very gates of death, sometimes, by this loving care. At Council Bluffs Captain Elyot was able to dismiss both ambulance and escort (the surgeon had left him some days before) and to go on down the river alone to Independence. Here he fell in with a light wagon-train drawn by mules and on a wager to reach Santa Fé before the first snow should fall. Joining this, he pursued again the trail over which he had passed the year before, with Blossom his invisible companion. Like a shadow her image followed him now; not like a shadow, for it left him neither day nor night. In the weary ride, day after day, or when he bivouacked under the stars, growing brighter every night, he found himself humming the refrain of her simple songs, or recalling a thousand of her innocent words and ways. Dear child! By this time she knew of his safety, and was looking out for him. With heart drawn toward heart, how blissful the meeting would be! He was faint with happiness as he pictured it in his mind.

The ride was not without its dangers. More than

once they were attacked. The North Platte was comparatively deserted: the Indians were moving south. They ran the gauntlet of their foes. But he could not have fallen now. His spirit would have risen with the strength of a score of men, if tried. He could not die now until he held Blossom once more in his arms.

CHAPTER XXIV.

HOME AGAIN.

THE day came at last when they must gain Fort Atchison, if no accident or calamity befell them. Morning dragged on to noon, and noon stretched out, barren and drear, cloud-cast and foreboding, to late afternoon; and then, like the gates of Paradise, the long, low line of *cheveux-de-frise* encircling the fort rose before the eager, far-seeing eyes of Captain Elyot. He broke away from the company. The very horse under him must have felt the sudden bound of his heart, as with his head lowered, his teeth shut tight, and his eyes fixed upon the goal, he dashed ahead. The dizzy ground flew out from under his horse's feet; he had no gaze for right or left; the familiar landscape wooed no glance; his eyes saw only that feebly-waving flag, growing, like the soul within him, every moment.

The sentry at the gate was one of his own men; but he had no word for him.

Sergeant McDougal came running, out of breath with haste and gladness, as the gate swung back.

"An' it's you? Though we kenned ye were na killed. Major McGrath, wi' three coompanies o' infantry an' a sprinkle o' cavalry, cam' thro' fra' Fort Wallace better'n a fortnight back, an' brought the news."

So Blossom knew, and waited for his coming!

He could only wring the man's hand, and hasten on.

The sergeant stared after him, rubbing his forehead in perplexity.

"Somebody maun tell her," he gasped, and started on a run for the major's quarters.

In the mean time Captain Elyot had gained his own door without meeting any one else. It was the hour of afternoon parade. The band began to play softly as he flung himself from his horse. "Days of absence" lingered in his memory for many a year after that. He did not pause with his hand on the latch. There was no foreboding in his heart, nothing but impatience and joy, to bursting. He threw the door open. Why should he wait to prepare her for his coming? He begrudged every retarding moment. His foot sounded strange upon the floor of the little passage to his wife's parlor. It was dark, and the door refused to open (it had a trick): he touched it with his foot, sending it back with a clang and a dull echo.

And the room was empty and stripped bare!

The very beating of his heart stopped. He staggered to the wall, groping like one struck blind. Then he rallied. Was it the drum outside suddenly awakened? or did the reverberation of his own heart seem to thrash the air, and make it quiver to sight and sound? There was some mistake here. He had entered the wrong door. But no; a gust of wind blew in after him, flapping a bunch of dried grass upon the wall. Blossom's own hands had pinned it there. White with the dust of long neglect, it fluttered down to his feet. He opened the door of the room where he had laid Blossom's fainting form upon the bed the morning when he rode away. Empty and bare!

Then an awful sense of calamity overwhelmed him. It was too terrible for dread : it was a revelation, like the sudden opening of an abyss beneath his very feet.

Some one stood in the doorway. It was the major's wife, who, at Sergeant McDougal's strange tidings, had run out in the bitter wind, without so much as a shawl over her head.

"Captain Elyot!" She fairly put her arms about his neck, and kissed him. "Welcome to life again! Oh, what a fright you gave us! We thought you were dead. But what are you doing here, man? Come home with me, or the major and every one else'll be there before us. Where is your wife?"

"My wife?" Captain Elyot turned a face like death upon her. "Mrs. Bryce, where is my wife?"

"Then you don't know? Is it possible that you don't know? Why, they left the fort full three months ago; and not a word have we heard of them since. But I fancied they had somehow reached you. Don't, pray don't! Why, man, you look as though you were turned to stone. Rouse up, and come home with me. My dear boy, I'm a silly woman, and don't know what to do," sobbed the major's wife; "but do come, come home to the major. He'll say something that'll make it right, I know. I'm so bewildered at the sight of you!" And Mrs. Bryce fell to sobbing aloud.

"Where did they go? What does it mean?" And the captain passed his hand over his eyes as though with this movement he could brush away the perplexity of his mind.

"I don't know. And there is little enough to tell, though I saw her more frequently than you may believe, after you left. We ladies were not quite just to

your wife at first : I am willing to acknowledge it now. But your marriage was a precedent we hardly wished to see established among us, Captain Elyot, though you might have looked far before finding another so gentle and sweet and altogether lovable as she. I little thought, once, that the day would come when I should say this to you. But the patience of that dear child through all those anxious weeks, even trying to bear up when every one else believed you were dead (because of some promise you had made her at the last), the forgiving spirit toward those who had scorned her, — and I was one, I say it with shame” —

“Mrs. Bryce, where did they go?”

“I don’t know. We have never heard. Mrs. Stubbs was silent and strange as to their plans, — her plans, I might say; for it was she who arranged every thing. They were going East, she said. This was after Lieutenant Gibbs came in (and, oh, what a mercy it was! and Claudia worn to a shadow), and we all believed you to be dead; only your wife held out to the last. You would yet come back she declared. *You had promised her.* Mrs. Stubbs said she would write as soon as they were permanently settled; but we have heard nothing. Still it is hardly time, though I can see that the major is uneasy. I never knew him to be so distressed as when the news came that you were dead” —

“But he should have detained them here.”

“He did what he could. But he might as well have tried to stop the wind from sweeping over the plains as to control that woman. We said every thing to persuade them to remain until another spring, when we shall probably be ordered East ourselves. The major seemed to feel that he was left in charge of your wife;

and he even threatened to use force to detain them; but that was nonsense, of course. What did they know of the world, he said; and, between you and me, the old woman was not quite" — the major's wife touched her forehead mysteriously. "But I am keeping you here; and he is at home before now, and wondering where you have hidden yourself; for there's not a man, woman, or child at the post, but knows of your arrival by this time."

"Leave me here;" and Captain Elyot turned again to the empty rooms.

"That I will never do!" Mrs. Bryce replied with decision. She rested her broad shoulders against the bare wall as she spoke. "I only wish I had brought a wrap of some kind. It is bitterly cold;" and she shivered perceptibly.

"I beg your pardon," he said humbly, moving toward the door. His hand lingered over the latch. How dear the place had been to him!

"I must set out in search of them at once, — tomorrow. The major cannot refuse to give me leave?" He spoke with anxious haste. He had shut out the happy past with the closing of that door. To search the world over till he found them was his only desire.

"Set out for the States, with a storm beginning already! No, no, Captain Elyot, you must be contented to stay with us a while. Another mail will very likely bring us all news of your wife. But we'll hear what the major has to say." And she led the way to her own door. "And a mercy it is that you got in when you did," as the snowflakes settled upon her bare head. Her heart had thrown down all its defences against him, as, indeed, it had surrendered to Blossom in her affliction.

Then, too, Claudia's marriage was arranged for the next month. Lieutenant Gibbs's return from the dead, as it were, had hastened matters. His expectations had borne unlooked-for fruit. And it was really a very desirable connection in every way; so that there was no longer any thing to regret on that score.

A bright light shone from Mrs. Bryce's windows. This was like the coming home the poor young man had dreamed of, with the fire glowing on the hearth, and Blossom waiting to greet him.

"Bless my soul, boy! and is it really you?" said the major, struggling with something very like tears, which rose and choked him as he bestowed a bear-hug upon the young man. "Here's Gibbs—where are you, Gibbs?" for the room was full, the news of Captain Elyot's arrival having flown the length and breadth of the fort—"and Blake.—Step up, Blake, and speak to the captain.—The rest of the poor fellows"—

The major turned suddenly to stare at the snow falling thick outside the windows.

One after another they crowded up to shake the captain's hand; but, when they pressed him for the story of his escape, Mrs. Bryce interfered, and dismissed them all.

"Another time, good friends,—to-morrow. We must give him a chance to rest and refresh himself before we begin upon that;" and she fairly bowed them out of the house. She would not risk the chance of their inquiring for his missing wife.

"And so you carried the despatches through, after all?" said the major, when the door had closed upon the last one. "You'll hear of that again, or I'm mistaken. You may be sure I didn't forget to mention it

in my report. But what's this they tell me? Don't know your wife's whereabouts? We fancied she must have found you, since every paper we have received has been full of your gallant and meritorious conduct. But the next mail will bring you something. Don't look so down in the mouth, boy. They're sure to know of your escape long before this. What the —— do you think newspapers feed on but such narrow escapes as yours? I venture to say that your face has appeared in every illustrated penny-a-line east of the Mississippi, altered over from an old woodcut of Captain Kidd. Cheer up, man!" And the cheerful assurance of the major's voice did lighten for a moment the load upon the young man's heart.

"But where are they? Did they leave no clew by which they can be traced?"

"No. Though, at the worst, I suppose we might learn something of them at Independence. I did inquire what had become of them when the wagons returned. But, if the old woman had been escaping for her life, she could hardly have taken more pains to cover up her trail."

"Did she try to do that?" Captain Elyot asked with a start.

"I can't tell. On my soul I don't know. But it looked like it. She has never been quite herself, you know, since Stubbs was killed. Straight enough in business, but queer, and more close-mouthed than ever about her own affairs. We tried to keep them here. Your wife would have been glad to stay, poor thing! for she had an odd fancy that you would yet come back. — Bless my soul! How the smoke from that con-founded chimney gets into one's eyes! — But the old

woman would go. There was nothing to stay for, she said, and the sooner they left, the better. So she hastened to sell out. Gibbs, perhaps you know, has developed a remarkable interest in household stuff. He bought some of the articles, and the sutler took the rest; for Mrs. Stubbs didn't stand upon pennies. She used to be sharp enough at a trade; but I believe she'd have given every thing away rather than to wait a month longer."

"And they almost new, as you know," broke in Mrs. Bryce. "Why, those rugs" —

"Never mind, Polly," said the major. He saw that the young man shrank from hearing his household goods enumerated. "Elyot won't care to know all that. And here comes Jinny at last. — You must be famished, Elyot."

"I hope I see ye weel, sir," said Jinny, with a meek obeisance. "Ye're lookin' blithe after the lang illness that we heard of."

"Thanks, Jinny! I'm quite recovered, I believe;" the captain responded.

"Jinny, here, knew as much of your family as any one," said the major, as the girl proceeded to set out the tea-table.

"I'll no say that I didna;" and Jinny began to lay the cloth with a critical eye to its exactness. "Mrs. Stubbs was na above a crack wi' an auld friend, beggin' your pardon, sir; an' as for the young leddy, bless her sweet face! she was ower gude to me. Many's the letter she wrote for me wi' her ain hand. An' as for the ribbons an' " —

"And where did they go, Jinny?" Captain Elyot was too eager for any information she might give to bear with this personal digression.

"That's what I dinna ken, sir;" and Jinny set down her cups and saucers, and rested her hands upon her hips in a thoughtful attitude. She and Sergeant McDougal had already discussed this question fruitlessly in the kitchen. "Ye mind the day, ma'am," she went on to her mistress, "when I gied 'em a hand at packin' their clothes an' the like? 'Ye hae freens where ye gang?' said I. 'I'm thinkin', Jinny,' said the puir thing, wi' a sigh, 'that I hae nae freens left.' An' it would 'a' touched the heart o' a green stane to 'a' seen her wi' the red wiped out o' her cheeks by the tears that were ne'er once dry in her een."

Mrs. Bryce had frowned in vain upon the girl, whose story was entirely too much for Captain Elyot. His head had dropped into his hands, through which his own tears trickled.

"I'll no tell a lee, ma'am," said Jinny stoutly, in reply to this unspoken reproof.

She was a stanch Presbyterian, and regarded her word in trifles as well as in greater matters. "Ye ken yer ain sel' that the puir lass was like a wraith, wi' nae mair red on her face than the snow that's droppin' out-o'-doors this blessed night. But for a' that," she went on, having thus relieved her conscience, "it may be that change o' scene an' gude news,—if so be that tidings o' the cap'in's escape ever reach her, which is na to be counted on, sin' ye say yerself that the newspapers tell naething but lees,—it may be that she'll yet be spared." With which comforting possibility the girl left the room at a sign from her mistress.

"Is it so?" said Captain Elyot. "Is her health so broken?"

"Nonsense!" said the major shortly. "Jinny enjoys

startling effects. The poor little thing had cried herself sick. That was all."

"To tell the truth," amended his wife, "she did have a serious illness, from which she was but just recovering when her mother took her away. I am sure she was unwilling to go; but she was not one to set up her own will. She was thin and pale, as Jinny says; but that was not to be wondered at, since she was hardly able to sit up all day when they set out for the States."

"And no one interfered! It may have killed her!" exclaimed the young man, almost beside himself with apprehension over this new occasion for alarm.

"We used every argument but force," the major replied. "But no one of us had any authority to come between the two. Besides, Mrs. Stubbs was thoroughly competent to manage her own affairs; and there was, as she said, no reason why they should remain here if they chose to go; and the journey made by easy stages, as she argued, would bring the girl's strength back, as I have no doubt it did. Cheer up, man! Blossom's cheeks are rosy enough by this time, I venture to say; and the old woman promised that we should have word of them before three months (and it is scarcely that), or even sooner, if they settled anywhere."

"Don't be down-hearted;" and Mrs. Bryce laid her hand upon the shoulder of the bent figure. "It is only a matter of patience. Try and content yourself here with us, at least until the next mail comes through."

"And then, if you hear nothing," broke in the major, "we'll find some way of sending you after her; for I see you'll be useless here.—Polly, should I take it so to heart if you were spirited away?"

"Not you!" replied Mrs. Bryce, with a laugh and a

toss of her cap-ribbons. “But come, come: here is the tea growing cold. We will not wait for Claudia. She must be going to spend the evening out.” She did not say that she had despatched a note to that young woman, who was spending an hour with a friend, announcing the startling arrival, — which was no news by the time it reached her, — and suggesting that it might be as well for her not to return until later in the evening, when the influx of visitors would be over.

CHAPTER XXV.

“GOING TO LEAVE US?”

CLAUDIA did not appear until the next morning, when she repeated the assurance her father and mother had already pressed upon their guest, that, long before this time, his wife must have learned of his safety, and, knowing that he would rejoin his command at once, the next mail would, without doubt, bring some tidings of her.

“I am sorry, Captain Elyot, to hear of your disappointment,” she said. And so she was, with that indiscriminate sorrow which we bestow, as good Christians, upon all men alike. But secretly, in her heart of hearts, she believed that justice was at last being meted out to him, and that he was only paying the penalty one must pay, in this world or the next, for one’s sins.

“It goes to my heart,” Mrs. Bryce had said, making an early visit to Claudia’s bedroom, in wrapper and night-cap. She and the major had sat late with their guest the night before, speculating upon Mrs. Stubbs’s intentions and motives; and there had been no opportunity to confer with Claudia, who had come in, and gone directly to her own room without seeing their visitor. “Poor fellow! I heard him walking the floor

half the night. I do believe he never went to bed at all."

"Indeed," Claudia replied coldly. She was coiling her hair, standing before the glass, and twisting it about her head like a crown. Her fingers neither trembled, nor relaxed in their efforts. So he was unhappy. Had she not had her full share of wretchedness? And no one had pitied her. She had not walked the floor, keeping others awake as well as herself; but her pain had been none the less because she had striven to hide it in her own bosom.

"You will meet him in a friendly way, as you used to long ago; won't you, Claudia?" Mrs. Bryce put the question fearfully. The one object of her early call had been to ask this; for Claudia had never come round to be gracious to Captain Elyot's wife. Even in Blossom's affliction she had withheld her sympathy. "He is very unhappy," the major's wife continued, with a mournful shake of the head, far from effective in her present costume. And so was I unhappy, thought Claudia bitterly; but no one was tender of me. "Why should I?" she replied perversely. "We are not at all intimate as we were once. How can I be the same? But I shall not forget that he is a guest in the house, and I suppose I shall tell him that I am sorry, and all that." And then she went on with her toilet, the bitter feelings, which had almost died away, aroused to aggressiveness by her mother's appeal.

"Well, that is all I ask you, to show something like sympathy for him. He is in great trouble; and, though you may not have fancied her, she was his wife, you know."

A faint red spot burned upon Claudia's cheek. The tip of her finger might have covered it.

"I suppose other people have had trouble as well as he, — and you will never be ready for breakfast if you stand there in your cap."

"Bless me, I had forgotten all about it!" And Mrs. Bryce hurried away, not at all sure that she had succeeded in her pacific attempt.

She need have had no fears as regarded Captain Elyot. He was entirely too miserable to resent any fancied ill-treatment or neglect of months before; or, if he had remembered either, Mrs. Bryce's frank admission and warm tribute to Blossom's worth would have set the matter right at once.

He appeared to Claudia both worn and ill-looking, when she entered the parlor a few moments before breakfast, seeing him for the first time, and alone. He rose, and advanced a step to meet her. It stung her afresh to feel that her past neglect and coldness had been nothing to him. She herself had been nothing to him at all; not the shadow of a passing interest touched him in meeting her again. There was not even the sting of a remembered slight, she could see, as he answered her greeting; for it was then she expressed her conventional sympathy, as related at the beginning of the chapter.

"You are very good," he replied simply, resuming his seat, and falling again into the reverie interrupted by her entrance. The unconseious rudeness provoked her to speech.

"Thanks," she replied with a smile, though he looked up with a quick stare, as if he had not understood her. "But, really, one might take you for the Knight of the Rueful Countenance," she went on with angry flippancy, advancing, and thrusting one foot out to the fire.

She had touched the quick this time. His face blazed scarlet. "Why should you give way to despair?" she added coolly, eying the fire, but aware of his start when her words touched him. "Nobody could be really lost, you know, *unless they desired to be*. It is always possible to track people. I daresay, if you had asked at Independence, you might have learned all about them. The world is not so large as people make it out to be, I fancy."

"Yes, if I had known. That is the torment of it; to think I may have been near them! I may have even passed her in the street!" And, regardless of Miss Bryce's presence, he began to pace the room.

"That could hardly have been possible," Miss Bryce replied in a matter-of-fact tone. "They must have left the town some weeks before you reached it."

It was a relief to Claudia when her mother and the breakfast appeared simultaneously. She had no desire to pursue this subject indefinitely. It was worse than uninteresting; and why should she affect an interest she was far from possessing? There was no danger of an immediate return to the *tête-à-tête*, since, before breakfast was well over, visitors began to arrive. Lieutenant Gibbs was among the first of these; and, as the room filled, he managed to draw Claudia away into a corner. But even here she was not safe from an appeal to her sympathies in behalf of the new arrival. "He seems awfully cut up, and no wonder," said the lieutenant. "What do you think I should have done, if I had come home to find you gone?"

"Made love to Augusta Wiley perhaps," Claudia replied carelessly. She was more than half in earnest, having very little faith in the vows of men.

"I say, Claudia, I know you don't mean it; but your jokes hit a fellow hard sometimes. Do you really believe I could get over it like that?" Something below the surface was stirred in the man. His moistened eyes searched her face.

"Of course I don't, silly. You'd set out in search of me, I hope."

"I'd hunt the world over, but I'd find you."

"Yes?" Claudia responded absently, making a movement toward the company of which Captain Elyot was the centre. This was almost worse than listening to him.

"Don't go!" He caught her dress slyly as she was edging away. "I never have a word with you alone."

"It is so rude to be whispering off in a corner!"

"Only a moment. See here, Claudia. If I were you, I wouldn't tell Elyot that we are to take his house."

"Why not?" And Miss Bryce opened her gray eyes. "He will have to know it."

"Well, not just now, not for a day or two: it might seem rough on him, you know."

"As you please," Claudia replied stiffly. "I presume I shall have no occasion to mention it. There will be nothing talked of at present but the Stubbsses and their probable location. I wish"—she began hotly.

"What is it you wish?" the lieutenant asked, with some anxiety.

"That he could gratify his desire, and set out in search of them," she added, controlling herself.

"So do I; and you are a dear girl to feel such an interest in his affairs, though once I shouldn't have said that. Do you remember?—but there, don't pull your hand away. I promised never to bring it up again, I know.

But it needn't vex you, now that every thing has come round all right, — except with Elyot, it's hard on him, Claudia, to come home and find his house empty, and his wife vanished, the Lord knows where ;” and the lieutenant pulled his long mustache, with a thoughtful shake of the head. “It's like a piece of poetry I remember in the reading-book when I was a little chap ; though, for the life of me, I can't think what it was all about.”

“Don't try.” And there was the slightest perceptible curl of Miss Bryce's upper lip. “But I see it is clearing off. We shall have a fine day, after all. I must try to get down to the house this afternoon. It is time something was done toward putting it in order.” Claudia plunged from sentiment into business, thankful of any diversion from this topic, which beset her on every side.

“And I'll go with you.”

“It isn't at all necessary. Men never can understand such things. Mamma had much better take it in hand.” Then, observing her lover's mortified air, she added in a more gentle tone, “We shall call upon you soon enough ; but at first I really think mamma and I had better go alone, and see what is to be done.” And with this very small sop of graciousness, and a sly squeeze of Claudia's hand behind her back, the lieutenant went off, happy and full of importance.

Miss Bryce's words, which had appeared so carelessly uttered, came to Captain Elyot's mind again when he was alone, when the excitement roused by telling the story of his escape and wanderings had passed away. The ebb of this tide carried much with it ; but Claudia's words remained. They had sunk deeper than he knew. “No one ever is lost,” she had said, “*unless they desire*

to be." He was too unsuspicious to fancy that she meant to give him pain: he tried to forget the thoughtless sentence. But light words hold fast as anchors sometimes; and he could not get rid of these, nor of the unreasonable fears they aroused. He knew that Blossom would not change toward him. Nor would she, of her own will, stay away from his side for an hour. But what if her mother held her back? Certain unformed doubts and suspicions, of which he had not been conscious before, took bodily shape now. What might not this woman do?

He remembered that he had married the girl almost in the face of Mrs. Stubbs's opposition. He had forced a confession of his love upon Blossom at a moment when her mother had dismissed him from the house. Later, she seemed to consent to the marriage, to exult over it, indeed, with an inconsistency he had been too happy at the time to try to fathom. Looking back now, he could see it all, as well as that a few weeks more had brought a change. The woman had become silent, and at times almost sullen. Selfish in his perfect happiness, he had paid no heed to her variable moods. If he noticed them at all, it was but to ascribe their changes to an unhappy temper, the best panacea for which was to ignore it altogether. Was the major right in his suspicion that she was not quite herself in these days? This was the simplest solution of the problem. But, if so, he trembled to think of Blossom in her hands. Still his reason told him that there was really nothing to fear. However variable Mrs. Stubbs's moods might be, she never wavered in her devotion to the child. Nor would she attempt to keep the girl from him when once she had learned of his escape. She would know too well

that Blossom's happiness was to be found only with him. Besides, what reason could she have for desiring to separate them? He felt there could be none. And this reflection cheered him in a measure. He had brought in some files of old newspapers. They were going the rounds of the camp. In each one was an item concerning the massacre of his party, while more than once the story of his escape was told, with different degrees of untruthfulness, sometimes even with a change of name, but making a hero of him in every recital. Some of these garbled stories must have caught the eye of his wife. She would be upon the watch for news from the Indian country, even though convinced at last that her husband was dead. But, though he soothed his anxiety with these reasonable suppositions, an image of Blossom wasted by suffering, and worn by illness, would rise in his mind, — the pale patient mourner described by Mrs. Bryce's Jinny. For Jinny had taken another opportunity, when her word could not be called in question, to assure him that Blossom had the appearance of one not "owar lang for this warl."

What if she were to die before the good news reached her!

Although the storm had cleared away, he was locked in here for the present. There was no escape; and the tedious routine of garrison life, with its hours of idleness, became almost unbearable. He shrank from the society of his friends, to brood over his trouble alone. The military force was somewhat less than it had been the previous winter, and there were fewer ladies at the post; but the dull season which the young officers deplored was a matter of indifference to him. It was, perhaps, because their circle had become so narrow, that

Captain Elyot's trouble seemed to overshadow them all. He was the cloud, no bigger than a hand, which may yet exclude the sun. Certainly his presence cast a gloom over the little company. He grew silent and morose as days limped into weeks, bringing no tidings of his wife, until, after a time, his friends wearied of offering sympathy so coldly received. And, indeed, hearty, outspoken sympathy is not inexhaustible, and a wise man will cover up his wound as soon as may be. It is better so. It is one of the curative processes of nature perhaps; but this poor young fellow, who did not realize that his own manner had altered, was hurt and almost angry. His wound was as fresh, and his disappointment as keen, as the day he had stepped into his house to find it empty and bare; but, to those around him, his trouble seemed to have become already a thing of the past. He fancied they were tired of his sad face and silent ways, as no doubt they were. "We were dull enough before poor Elyot came back," some one said. He shut himself up from them all. What would have become of him in these days, but for the major and Mrs. Bryce, I cannot tell. The latter had nothing to do, since Claudia was so nearly off her mind, but to lament over and make much of this young man, whom she had quite taken into favor again. So entirely had she forgotten the past, that if, one of these frosty mornings, Blossom had stood at the door, she would have given the girl a welcome to which that of the prodigal son was but cold in comparison. She would even have wept tears of joy over Mrs. Stubbs herself, had that grim female chosen to appear. The captain still made one of the family; for the major's wife would not hear to his going away, and, if the truth were told, the officers' mess hardly desired his

company now. So the Bryces had him all to themselves, — quite too much to themselves, Claudia thought sometimes, even though her attention was given to more personal affairs, and he intruded himself but seldom upon her notice. She did not enjoy his presence in the house. It could hardly be said that there remained any of her former feeling for him. His cold indifference, his heartless indifference as she had called it, had ground that out of her, leaving a kind of sullen anger in its place. It was not that she still wept secretly over his perfidy (as she thought); but his presence reminded her of a time when she had. Wounded pride, after love, is like the lees of wine: it remains when the draught is drunk up. And to see this man sit day after day, gazing into the fire or out of the windows, with eyes themselves like empty windows, was a sight hateful to her. He sat in her gates; and, so long as he sat there, life was a burden to the girl. She rejoiced in the thought that the time was drawing near when she should leave her father's house, — not with the joy with which a bride is supposed to go forth to meet the bridegroom, but with the feeling of a prisoner looking toward deliverance. She should be rid of this reminder of the past, which still held her like a tightened cord, cutting her to the quick.

"I think he might rouse himself," she said to her mother. They were trying on the gown in which Claudia was to be married two days later; and she spoke with a pin between her teeth as she re-adjusted a plait. "He may be as wretched as he chooses to be, I don't deny him the right; but there's no reason why he should make everybody about him unhappy. I declare," she added, with sudden anger, "one might as well be married with a corpse in the house!"

"Claudia Bryce!" exclaimed the horrified mother. "How can you talk so? The poor" —

"Don't pity him," broke in Claudia. "I really cannot bear it. And what would you have me do? I am civil enough, or as civil as need be to a man who regards every one about him as so many stocks and stones. I even told him I was sorry for his disappointment, and hoped he would be able to set out before long in search of his wife; which I do indeed. What more can I say? Or why should we go moping about over the loss of this girl, whom we never visited when she was here? The gloom of the house is something awful; and I am heartily sick of sopping my bread in the waters of affliction."

"You don't mean what you say, or you never would talk in such a heartless way," Mrs. Bryce replied. "How can he be cheerful, poor young man! And, if you have any thing against the girl, you ought to forget it, now that we don't know whether she is living or dead."

"What should I have against her?" said Claudia, with a stare. "We never exchanged a dozen words. But it's my belief that they left because they didn't care to stay and learn the truth. However, it's nothing to us. But it's not particularly cheerful for me." Her head was turned over her shoulder; but, though she spoke carelessly, there was a break in her voice which touched the mother's heart. She determined to speak to Captain Elyot, to urge him to bear up under his trouble, at least until after Claudia had gone. It was hard that her wedding should be clouded, and by his sorrow, of all others in the world.

But, before an opportunity occurred, Claudia opened the subject herself.

It was the evening of the same day, when they sat before the fire, Claudia and her mother, in the quiet half-hour before tea. Miss Bryce had been hemming her wedding-veil; and the soft cloud of tulle overflowed her lap as Captain Elyot turned away from the window, where he had made a pretence of reading Jomini's "Waterloo," and came to the fire.

"Captain Elyot," said Claudia, in a quiet, even voice, breaking the stillness of the room, "I am going to be married to-morrow."

"I wish you much joy, Miss Claudia." But there was no joy in the voice uttering the words.

"You'll come in with the others? I believe we have asked everybody."

There came back to her, with a flash of remembrance, that other time in this same room, when he had come to ask them to his wedding, and she had scorned his invitation. She had not even excused herself, or offered conventional good wishes. The firelight glowed in her face as she waited for his reply. Would he, too, scorn her asking? She little knew how lightly the whole matter had rested on his mind. It had been every thing to her, and nothing to him.

"I should be a skeleton at the feast," he said. Then he rose abruptly, forgetting the presence of these two, and bowed his head upon his hands as he leaned upon the mantel.

"But you ought not to be," Claudia said hastily, crumpling the lace in her arms. "There is no reason why you should make yourself miserable" — and every one else, she desired to add, but did not.

"Claudia," her mother whispered warningly.

"Let me speak," said Claudia aloud. "Every one is

afraid to say it; but I dare tell him the truth. Why should he make himself wretched, and every one about him uncomfortable, over he knows not what? If he had any real grief" —

Captain Elyot had raised his head. His cheek was scarlet, as though she had struck it with her hand. Then it turned deathly white.

"If I had any real grief, as you call it, I hope I should bear it like a man," he said steadily. "It is the suspense," and his voice shook for a moment, "which has made me so forgetful of what is due to others. I did not mean to force my trouble upon you. You should not have taken me in. Now I will go away." And he moved toward the door as though he would go at once.

"What do you mean? Go away! You poor boy, where would you go? And to-night! You shall do nothing of the kind. — Claudia, how could you? — But indeed she did not mean to reproach you. We only thought it might be well if you would rouse yourself. — That was it, wasn't it, Claudia? — We were speaking of it to-day." Mrs. Bryce had run around from her place in the corner to catch the young man's hand in both of her fat white ones. But, when she looked to Claudia for some response to her appeal, she found the girl had left the room. Nothing remained but the veil, which had dropped out of her hands, and trailed after her along the floor.

"Yes, I will go," repeated Captain Elyot more calmly.

"Indeed, you shall not think of it." But Mrs. Bryce's voice was weak, her manner absent. She was vexed with Claudia, and her heart was divided. Had

she been wise in bringing this young man here, causing her own family to be ill at ease in order to comfort him? And had she lessened his sorrow, after all? In his present state of mind one place was much like another. Was it not her duty to let him go if he would?

He felt her hesitation.

"You see I am right," he said. "Don't let me make another mistake. I ought to have gone before. But I shall never forget that you took me in — when I was homeless," he added under his breath.

"But — it seems so ungracious."

"It is I who have been ungracious."

"Perhaps — until after the wedding," Mrs. Bryce went on, following out her own thoughts. She was ashamed to consent to this inhospitable proceeding; and yet she realized all at once that his absence would be an immeasurable relief. "But where would you go?"

"I could easily find a place. Lawton would take me in until I could do better."

"And you would promise to come back?"

"What's this?" The major opened the door upon an astonishing tableau. "Ah, Polly, Polly!" he said with a twinkle in his eye.

"The captain has made up his mind to leave us, at least for a few days, until the wedding is over. He feels hardly equal to it; and I don't know that we can urge him to stay." She did not intend to tell a lie: her ideas had only all at once arranged themselves anew.

"Going to leave us!"

How plain the whole matter became to her mind at once!

"You can easily see, Major Bryce, that to be in the midst of all these preparations" —

There was danger of her comfortable plans being set aside, after all. And what if the major should learn of Claudia's outbreak? But Captain Elyot allowed her statement of the ease to pass. It was true enough; and the major did not persist.

"Well, well, as you please," he said, rubbing his hands thoughtfully. "You're welcome to stay, or to come back when the bustle is over. We'll have something better than a welcome for you by that time. There'll be a mail in by the last of the week; and then, Elyot, if you hear nothing you shall go. — We'll give him marching-orders; won't we, Polly? — But sit down, man, and take a cup of tea: time enough to look up quarters after that — if you will go."

"Do," urged Mrs. Bryce, though she hoped in her heart he would refuse. Claudia's entrance after the tea-tray might set them by the ears again.

"Thanks, but I will not wait; and, if I do not appear to-morrow, will you believe that Miss Bryce has my hearty congratulations? I fear, as you say, that I am not equal to offering them in person."

Mrs. Bryce hastened to reply, and cover his departure with a cloak of words, lest some other reference to Claudia should bring out the immediate cause of this hasty move. What would her husband say if he knew that Claudia had fairly driven their guest from the house? Her own conscience was not without its qualms as she followed him to the door.

"You will not mind Claudia's foolish speech?" she said anxiously. "Her nerves are not as strong as usual; and, indeed, there is a good deal to try one at such a time, and after all the anxiety she has been through."

“On the contrary, I am grateful for her frankness. I begin to see that I have given occasion for it.”

“No, no: I will not allow that. But you will come back?”

“Like black care? You are too kind. I’m afraid I shall. Good-night.” And he was gone.

CHAPTER XXVI.

“WHY, MAN, THE MAIL’S IN!”

AND so it came about that Claudia’s wedding was a shade less lugubrious than it had seemed likely to be to that much betroubled young woman; though it was by no means a joyous affair, the only person thoroughly happy and satisfied in the assembly—at least of those most nearly concerned—being the bridegroom, whom some subtle and to him incomprehensible influence withheld from all expression of joy. Although Captain Elyot had taken himself away, his shadow, perhaps, still lingered.

For he did not appear at the wedding. He sat alone, through all the long afternoon, in the room of a friend, as friends go,—one of the men whose boundaries had been made by circumstances to touch his own, without their inner selves coming in contact. In this log-hut, for it was hardly more, he sat smoking a pipe, which was any thing but a pipe of peace to him. It was one of those days in early winter when a sudden thaw unlocks the scarcely frozen streams, and scatters the snow like hoar-frost under the sun. Some fascination drew him to the open window in time to see the wedding-guests disperse, and the wedded couple repair to the

house which was to be their home. They two alone, till death did them part. The words of the marriage covenant floated through his mind. No, nothing in life could separate Blossom from him. More than that, he even went beyond the words of the prayer-book. She was his, living or dying: even death could not come between true hearts. But he bowed his head upon his arms, and groaned aloud. How he hungered for the sight of her face! The warm west wind sweeping over the open prairie touched his forehead as it had done that spring morning only a few short months back, when they two had walked the same path to the same door,—they two, but one. He recalled her shy trembling as she crossed the threshold. The door closed after them, shutting out the dropping rain, shutting out the curious world. Oh the bliss of that moment when he took her in his arms!

He was roused from a revery akin to delirium by the grinding of a step on the bare floor. At such a time every comer is a messenger. He started up, his heart striking great blows, like a hammer in a heavy hand. But it was only the young captain whose quarters he had invaded.

“Halloo, Elyot, you don’t mean to say you’ve sat here the blessed afternoon long! Why, man, the mail’s in!” His hands were full of letters and papers.

Captain Elyot staggered to his feet. Death itself could hardly have painted a more ghastly face than his as he tried to speak. Then, as the blood rushed back to the surface, the words came with it.

“Do you know—did you hear my name?” Oh, what an agony of anxiety was in the question!

“’Pon my word I didn’t! I never heard another

name but my own. But I'll run back and ask." And the kind-hearted fellow, who knew, as did everybody at the post, of Captain Elyot's suspense, threw down his own unopened letters. But he was too late. Captain Elyot had gone.

He was pushing with fierce strength through the little crowd of disappointed seekers still lingering about the chaplain, who held half a dozen unclaimed missives in his hand. When, at last, breathless and panting, he stood face to face with this man who held for him life or death at the moment, he was speechless. They all stood back (the humblest of them knew his trouble, and respected it), while the chaplain turned the letters over unsteadily in his hand.

"Elyot, Elyot. There must be some mistake, captain: I don't find your name."

The crowd closed upon him; and a sudden darkness seemed to fill the room,—a whirling darkness, in which he reeled. Some one laid a detaining hand upon his own; but he wrenched himself free, and struck out instinctively for the open air and solitude, in which he might hide his hurt. The major's wife overtook him walking straight away, he knew not where. It had run through the garrison, like fire in grass, that no news had come of Elyot's wife; and the kind, blundering woman had put her own letters by unread to search him out.

"Dear, dear, but this is dreadful! Still it will be better next time: it must be better next time. We should not have placed so much reliance upon this one mail, as if there were never to be another! And yet I am convinced there are letters waiting for you somewhere, if we could only get them."

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"Thanks; but I will not trouble you." The captain stood up very straight, and removed his hat as he stepped out of the path for her to go by.

"I said I could bear it if the worst came." His eyes, looking beyond her, were glazed and tearless: his voice was hollow, but held no tremor.

She burst into tears.

"Don't talk to me about trouble, you poor boy! Are we not all one family here? Come home with me, and we'll see what can be done. Your letters may have gone to Fort Wallace. In that case, we'll soon hear of them. Or I may have some news for you. There are my own letters to read, and the newspapers. We have forgotten the newspapers. There must be something."

Her own faint hopes gained strength with this last suggestion, as some dim recollection of the "personal" column came to her mind. Might not Blossom, ignorant of her husband's locality, resort to this method of communicating with him?

She took him by the arm, and turned him about, as though he had been a child. More than one friend saw and eluded them as they retraced their steps. No one wished to meet the man fresh from his disappointment. But Mrs. Bryce's tongue ran on.

"The major'll have heard of it by this time, and we'll hold him to his promise. For he said, if nothing came by this mail, you should go in search of your wife; though how you ever are to find her I cannot see. And you no more fit to set out on such a journey than — than Blossom herself!" And, indeed, the strength he had gained in his long, rough ride had been dragged away from him by these anxious weeks. He looked worn and broken.

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She led him into her parlor, and seated him in the most comfortable chair it contained. Then she bustled about, and poured out a glass of wine.

"There, drink that while I look over my letters." And she tore the first open in haste. "But I forgot: where are the newspapers?" He had swallowed the wine at a draught, and lay back in the chair, the quiet of utter hopelessness upon him. But at her quick tone, and a shower of newspapers, he sat up, and began to turn them over, reading their superscriptions with vacant eyes, too weak or indifferent to look farther.

"It will at least take up his mind," thought Mrs. Bryce as she ran down the first page of her letter.

"And be sure that the 'personals' do not escape you," she added aloud, but without raising her eyes from the sheet before her. "I have known very respectable people to communicate with their friends in that way;" though Mrs. Bryce's knowledge, it must be owned, was by report rather than actual.

Mechanically turning over the papers, still enclosed in their wrappers, Captain Elyot paid very little heed to this advice, which had hardly reached his understanding, until something in the address of one struck his eye. His perceptions were dulled by the blow he had received; but a strange thrill ran through his veins at sight of this address,—Mrs. Bryce's name, written in an odd, heavy hand, a chirography regular, yet without elegance, such as any illiterate person of methodical habits might acquire by years of enforced use. All at once he seized upon the resemblance which had puzzled him. It was not unlike the hand in which Mrs. Stubbs had been accustomed formerly to remind her patrons of their indebtedness to her.

Mrs. Bryce, lost in her letter, had entirely forgotten her companion. She had settled herself comfortably to the deciphering of its fourth and most illegible page, when a sound like a shuddering groan reached her ears, recalling her to the present. Captain Elyot's head had fallen forward upon his breast. The man was unconscious. A scream brought Jinny from the kitchen, and hastened the steps of the major, just entering the house. Some one took the open newspaper from the loosened fingers, and then they saw that a heavy black line had been drawn about one column,—the column of deaths; and they read, with a shock of surprise and sorrow which no words can tell:—

“Oct. 17, Blossom, wife of Captain Robert Elyot, U. S. A.
Aged 18.”

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE CITY WITH A PAST.

THERE is at least one city in New England which boasts of a past, — not a far-off past, shrouded in beauty and mystery, like that which follows in the footsteps of the old-world cities, but a yesterday only, as nations reckon time, the story of which is remembered and repeated to-day. And lest it should be forgotten, with the lesson it is believed to teach, a shaft of granite has been erected in the town, about whose summit on cloudless nights the stars gather and shine. Even as I write, the flags are but just lowered, the bells have hardly ceased ringing, the echo of the cannon is still in my ears, which celebrates the hundredth anniversary of the event which gave to the town its importance, and to a scattered, feeble people the hope of becoming a nation.

It does not matter that this monument really commemorates a defeat, instead of a victory, or that the battle fought here bears in history the name of another height, not far distant, which never trembled to the thunder of cannon. That it marks the beginning of a great nation, and keeps in memory a struggle for independence which was successful at last, are enough

to endear it to the hearts of the towns-people, and make it the shrine of a continual pilgrimage.

Here upon every day in the year is seen the nearest approach to the genus tourist we Americans can show in our own land; since the more sober sort among us, who keep within the generous confines of our own country, still hold it half a sin to give ourselves up to ease, and idle roaming about. Bridal parties come here. Though what care they, happy, self-engrossed souls, for General —, who, without food, and with scant ammunition for his men, held his position through all the long, hot day a hundred years ago? or for General —, whose fall is yet considered by the hearty patriots of the town to be of scarcely less importance than that of Adam? Clerks and students of an historical turn of mind, off on a brief holiday, find their way here also, with a straggling multitude of miscellaneous people, — well-to-do people who have travelled abroad, and, returning full of restlessness and national pride, are inclined to make the most of their own historical relics; or others less successful, who, having no hope of viewing foreign lands, make a virtue of knowing their own. Among the first may occasionally be seen the traditional tourist, recognized by his clothes (made in London), by his open guide-book, which in this case cannot be Murray, but, above all, by his air of indifference. For it is the proper thing to do, if one desires to be a genuine tourist, to travel a thousand miles, more or less, to see an object, and to view it at last with a stolidity akin to contempt.

But the true shrine-seekers, the real hero-worshippers, come like pilgrims, — on foot, dusty, and travel-worn. Their faces are often old and wrinkled; their garments

worn and queer. Not for them wait the carriages by the curbstone at the foot of the mound. They climb the high steps with many a pause, their hearts filled with holy emotion, their eyes blessed with double sight, — of time that was and time that is. For them bugle and drum, and cry of wounded men, mingle with the peaceful drone of busy life in the town below; and the shaft of stone, over which the summer sun creeps lazily is an altar red with the blood of patriots.

From the windows of the handsome houses in the square surrounding the monument, the towns-people look out approvingly upon all this adoration, unlike the inhabitants of many a storied city in other lands, who wonder stupidly why travellers should come so far to view what they regard so little, be it memento to saint or hero. Here one shred of history preserved through a hundred years, a martyr or two to liberty (whose names are almost forgotten), have served to bind the older inhabitants together like a chain; have dwarfed other objects in importance, as though they had indeed been viewed from the top of the monument itself; and aroused a pride almost like personal vanity. Nor is this to be wondered at in the people to whom have been committed, if not the oracles, at least the traditions of this spot.

But all this is changing, and passing away. Already the town has been swallowed up by the larger and adjoining municipality. A tide from the outside world brings indifference to the glory of the past. We look to the future. A hundred years more, and the tourist wandering over the neglected mound, so carefully kept now, may find the monument converted into a vast chimney to serve the purposes of a new age!

But, although we write of a past, the monument was erected scarce half a century ago. The square about it is new. The houses are new and clean. More than one generation must sweep by before they attain to the mouldy ugliness of respectable age. But in the less fashionable parts of the town, dingy old, wooden mansions belonging to the time of its earlier, though not to its first settlement, still abound. Poor old houses! They have been exposed to fire. They have been drawn and quartered and sawn asunder, not to mention the indignity of being given over at last to the refuse population.

Some, however, from their situation and connections, like high-born recusants, have fared better than their contemporaries. Among these, most fortunate of all, perhaps, has been the Brock house, where old Jeremy Brock had spent many years of a long life, and from which, at last, he had passed away to a mansion even less destructible, it is to be hoped.

The High Street, which skirts one side of the monument, had, like the sword of a conqueror, cut its way through this old house, just beyond the square. The wound healed, having been patched up with brick and mortar, and the street went its way years ago, without heeding the harm it had done, or turning, indeed, to the right or left; but the scar remains. The entrance to the house is upon the side. There is a garden here, filling up the corner where this cruel, blood-thirsty street intersects a more peaceable thoroughfare descending the hill. It is shut in from curious eyes by a high wooden fence; and, as though this were not enough, the last has been surmounted by a narrow lattice. But, in truth, there is nothing to screen or conceal, as any one may

see through the gaping cracks in the wooden wall,— nothing more than a sloping grass-plot and a few old trees, which, perhaps, ran down the hill when they were young and frolicsome, and have grown too crooked and old and rheumatic to return. A narrow border of flowers did once follow the path from the gate to the door, and, at the time of which we write, a few daring crocuses still thrust themselves up through the mould in early spring-time, to stare about with pale, frightened faces. A great straggling bunch of phlox, too, nodded with disagreeable familiarity from under the windows; but that was all. Nothing which betokened care or fond pride bloomed in the garden now.

The house itself, with its closed blinds, seemed like a man who had shut his eyes before going to destruction. It had been uninhabited since the death of its owner. Poor old Jeremy Brock! He had outlived all his children, and died alone at last. Though, if they had been spared, he would still, perhaps, have died alone; for they met but to disagree, and separated in anger more than once. Repentance and forgiveness were not unknown in the family; but both were short-lived. The old man was exacting, his sons reckless and wasteful; and his one daughter (as wilful as handsome) chose beggary and a worthless husband to hard obedience and plenty. They scattered far and wide, each pursuing his or her own desires. Death only, by a wide sweep of his scythe, gathered them together at last.

When his children were all gone, the old man looked about him for an heir. He was proud of his ancestry, if not of his immediate family, and had no mind that the latter should die out. He had been careful of his means even to miserliness, and hated to feel that an-

other must spend what he had hoarded ; yet he adopted for his successor the open-handed, careless son of his only sister, — his heir-by-law since the death of his last son. He fancied that the good-nature of young Robert Elyot might prove to be tractability, a common mistake enough, which he was years in finding out ; for the profession of the army, which the young man had chosen, allowed him but little leisure ; and his visits were brief, and seldom to his uncle's house. Then, too, the old man, from some odd contrariety of disposition, was fond of the handsome young soldier, who would do credit to the family, he thought, when he was dead and gone, and had even something of a head for accounts, which none of his own boys had possessed. He altered his manner of life, in a measure, on the occasion of young Elyot's visits, opening the house to visitors, grudgingly indeed, but gratifying his own pride thereby ; for everybody courted and flattered the young man. They would have spoiled him, had he been less than he was. But this adulation, though it fed his pride, and added to his self-importance for the time, did no great harm. A few weeks among his male companions at school or in camp soon rubbed out any false quantity of either. His uncle made him a generous allowance, enough to furnish some grounds for his expectations ; increasing it when he found that play, that curse of an idle life, was not among his nephew's failings. Nor was this confidence thrown away. Captain Elyot was open-handed, without being wasteful. Not but that he fell into various minor extravagances, and gained experience as dearly as most people. But warned, perhaps, by the example of his cousins, and knowing full well the result of such a course as theirs, he avoided debt, and, by keeping within

his income, gained a firm place in the esteem of his uncle, to whom a wasteful hand was worse than a pestilence.

All went smoothly enough for a few years, until such a time, as we already know, when the old man would have provided a wife for his nephew. And here, for the first time, the well-trained, tractable young heir proved restive. Still old Jeremy, who was beginning to enjoy this new experience of having his own way, could not for a moment believe that Captain Elyot would really set himself against his wishes. "For there's the money," thought the old man. "How will he ever expect to get the money if he goes against my wishes?" To him — to this old man just ready to don his grave-clothes, and step into his tomb — the money was every thing. He did not realize, that, to young life just becoming conscious of the throb of its pulses, all things seem possible, and many more desirable than hard, yellow gold to clutch in the hand. Even so intangible a thing as liberty is sweeter. So, indeed, Captain Elyot was beginning to feel.

There was a grand-niece down upon the Jersey shore, whom old Mr. Brock had not seen since she was a child. But this was the girl he had selected to be his nephew's wife. He knew nothing of her beyond the fact that she was of a suitable age, — a year or two more or less did not matter. And it would keep the money in the family, he thought with a quiet chuckle, when the idea first occurred to him. He had not been blind to the adulation offered to his heir. "It's the money," he said, when he saw how one and another of the mothers with marriageable daughters smiled upon him, and asked him to their houses. Any one of these girls, who simpered

and blushed at his approach, the boy might have for the asking. He was mistaken there, as he was in reckoning upon his nephew's greed, gauging it by his own. Gold does not always shine in young eyes; and love will sometimes claim its own, thank God! in spite of wealth and scheming.

He was by no means discouraged when young Elyot laughed at the suggestion that he should pay a visit to his Jersey relatives, and search out this distant cousin; for the young man could not regard it as a serious proposition. Even when he came to see that the idea had taken possession of the old man's mind, he only avoided the subject, and at last shortened his visit, believing, that, in his absence, it would soon be forgotten.

But no sooner had he gone than uncle Jeremy himself began negotiations. He sent for his grand-niece to pay him a visit; and when she came, by a surprising good-fortune she proved to be all that he could have desired,—amiable, well-bred (for the Brocks came of good stock, and inherited a fine address as well as certain other more tangible possessions), of a sweet, frank nature, indeed. She was a year or two older than her cousin, to be sure, whom she had never seen, and persisted in regarding as a boy; but that was a matter of no consequence.

“She'll be all the more likely to keep him in a straight road,” he said. For uncle Jeremy knew, and dreaded to be reminded again, of all the by-ways and turnings which the course of a young man was likely to take.

He said nothing, for a while, of his matrimonial project in her behalf; and Mary Lane, believing that she had been asked from pure good-will and family feeling,

gave herself up to the enjoyment of her visit. The house was dull, — for the old man lived alone, with a housekeeper somewhat younger and considerably sourer than himself, — but Mary's presence enlivened it for the time. As the news of her arrival spread about the quiet town, one after another of the families in the neighborhood, comprising its "best" society, came to pay their respects to old Mr. Brock's niece, beginning with Mrs. Mincer, a widow of widows, with whom mourning had become a habit, and whose eyes leaked like a neglected roof. It was but natural that she should lead the advance, since, having no family cares (for she was childless), the time, as she often affirmed with a sigh, hung heavy upon her hands. Then, too, she was one of old Jeremy's nearest neighbors, making her home with her sister's family, the Wymans, in a showy house just around the corner, upon the square. She carried a favorable report of the stranger to her friends, and again the old man saw one of his kin courted and made much of. This was as it should be. It was proper and right that the girl should make friends against the time when she came here to live as his nephew's wife. So Mary, quite unconscious of the source of the old man's evident gratification, entered into all the gayety prepared in her honor, drawing about her such a crowd of followers, for there was something extremely winning in the air and face of the young woman, — that the old man began to be alarmed for his nephew; alarmed and angry above all with the open, evident admiration of Tom Akers, the son of a neighbor, and unfortunately irreproachable as to both family and character.

It was time the young woman was informed of the

honor prepared for her. He began to think it a mistake that she had not been told before : so, one morning, when she had come down late to breakfast, after an evening out (old Jeremy could have sworn that he had heard Tom Akers's voice at the door an hour after midnight), he prepared to open the subject.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

OLD JEREMY'S NIECE.

THE breakfast-room looked out upon the garden. The morning sun found its way in at the small-paned windows, and lay in great, dusty, golden bars across the heavy, worn furniture of the handsome old room; but it could not brighten the face of Miss Bunce the housekeeper, who appeared more bilious and sullen than ever as she brought in the coffee-urn, and prepared to set out the breakfast, at an hour quite unusual in the well-regulated household.

"Sit down, Bunce, sit down," said uncle Jeremy a little sharply, when that useful female had travelled in and out at the door a dozen times, with an aggravating creak in her shoes, which only added to the old man's nervousness. He held open upon his knees the Bible, in which he regularly read a chapter every morning, not even omitting those filled with genealogies. It was a kind of superstitious rite, not to be set aside. And how did he know but neglecting these last might prove the jot or tittle which should finally count against him? He laid the book aside now, and took his place at the table, awaiting Miss Bunce, whose movements seemed more energetic than usual this morning.

"Come, come, Bunce, that will do. Sit down, and let us be comfortable."

Old Jeremy could be sharp enough to others; but rumor said that he lived in wholesome awe of this woman, who had managed his house for half a score of years.

"There's no such thing for me as sitting down at this hour. I've matters to attend to as'll spoil to be kept waiting," replied the amiable female. "Perhaps Miss Mary'd take the trouble to pour your coffee?"

"To be sure I will." And Mary took the head of the table as Miss Bunce left the room, closing the door after her with a jar which set old Jeremy's teeth on edge. "Bunce grows worse and worse, uncle. How do you get along with her?"

Mary put two lumps of sugar into old Jeremy's cup as she stepped thus carelessly upon eggs, as it were.

"Bunce is well enough," her uncle replied shortly. "She'll last my time."

"But old people should take to comfortable ways," persisted the young woman. "And she grows worse, I am sure. I fancy I can see a change in these few weeks. She is decidedly cross. There is something positively aggressive in the creak of her shoes."

But her uncle did not laugh. He was slowly eating his breakfast, and revolving in his mind how he could best tell his niece of the future he had in store for her. Might not this be as good an opportunity as any?

"Bunce may have reasons for seeming out of temper with you," he said solemnly. His manner when grave was always solemn. He was a small old gentleman, of florid complexion and apoplectic build: he was rather benevolent as to general appearance, but could be testy

as a spoiled child, if opposed. "Perhaps she fancies that you mean to supplant her one day."

"*I* turn housekeeper? You are laughing at me, uncle Jeremy."

But uncle Jeremy was not in a light mood she saw at once.

"I don't mind telling you, Mary, as you are a sensible girl, that I have something on my mind which concerns you."

The color deepened a little in the old man's face, and he was not quite at ease as he uttered this preliminary remark. To tell the truth, now that the time had come, he found it a somewhat difficult matter to announce his scheme to his niece. She was not a young girl, to be led entirely by her elders; and she had, he knew, a high spirit of her own. What if she should resent the interference? He was a testy old gentleman, and could be disagreeable enough upon occasions; but he was, after all, of a timid disposition, unless aroused.

"I would like to have a little talk with you," he went on, fidgiting with his knife and fork, and finally laying them down.

"Very well, uncle," Mary replied quite gravely now, leaning back in her chair. What could it mean? Had she displeased him by her irregular manner of life since she came? But no: she had accepted the civilities of his friends with his approval. He had not objected to the late hours this involved of necessity, and had even himself suggested that the breakfast be pushed forward an hour, which was, without doubt, the occasion of Bunce's ill temper. He spoke of her supplanting the latter. Could it be that he was about to ask her to leave her own home, and come to live with him?

The old man's eye was upon her as she leaned back in her chair, the color coming and going in her cheek with these shifting suggestions. She was not young. At least she had lost the roundness and bloom of young girlhood; but the outline of both face and figure was still full enough for beauty, and with her clear, fair skin, just showing a touch of color, her clear, gray eyes, and the dark hair folded smoothly away from her small ears, she was pleasant to look at. The young heir might go farther, and fare worse. So the old man thought as his gaze rested on her.

"You know you are not rich, Mary," he began abruptly.

"No, uncle; but I have never wanted for any thing. And then I am happy in having rich friends, who supply my fancied needs," she added lightly. Her eyes had fallen upon the dark gold bands about her wrists, a present from uncle Jeremy only the day before. I am afraid he had not been innocent of bribery.

"And you are getting on, Mary, — getting on. Let me see" —

"Twenty-seven next Christmas." A quick flush crossed her face, though she laughed quietly. "But really, uncle, it is hardly fair to bring up all my disadvantages at once.

"It is time you were thinking of settling in life."

He pursued the subject in his mind, having once made a beginning, without the slightest heed to her side remarks.

"But I have thought of it. I have hardly been allowed to think of any thing else. There is not an old woman of my acquaintance who does not shake her head over my misfortune or perversity, and remind me of the flight of time."

"Could you be contented to live here? — so far from your friends, I mean. Could you be happy among these new friends you have made?"

Something like this Tom Akers had asked her the night before, when they stood for a moment at the door in parting, — only to watch the moon shining through the leafless branches of the great elm at the corner.

"I might — I think I could," she answered, the blush deepening on her face.

Old Mr. Brock drew away from the table, and rested his feet upon the fender, prepared to make himself comfortable, since Mary was likely to prove so docile.

"Well, Mary, you know, of course, that Robert is to be my heir. I have never made any secret of it; and I believe I wrote you, in asking you to come here, that it would make no difference in regard to the property."

"Certainly, it was quite understood," the young woman said quickly. Could it be that her uncle suspected her of trying to supplant her cousin Robert? Had Bunce suggested it?

"I have been thinking for some time that it would be well for Robert to marry. There is no reason why he should not leave the army, and come home and try his hand at managing affairs," old Jeremy went on reflectively. "And, after thinking it well over, I have come to the conclusion that he can't do better than to marry you."

"*Me, uncle?*" Mary started upright in her chair, entirely taken by surprise by the turn of his reflections.

"Yes, *you*," the old man said, lowering his thick eyebrows, and seeming to swell inside, as he always did at the first suspicion of opposition. "And why not? You would both be provided for, and there'd be an end

of it. For I must say, Mary, I should like to do something for you; but it is too late to change every thing now without robbing your cousin."

"But I am two years older than cousin Robert," she gasped, striving for a moment of time to rally her forces.

"What of that? Your aunt (your great-aunt) was ten years older than I; but that only gave her experience. She had got over her flightiness, and was all the more capable to manage the house. There were few like her," the old man went on slowly, and shaking his head.

"But, uncle" (something throbbed in the girl's throat, and choked her), "have you spoken of this to Robert?"

He could not tell her that he had not only spoken, but written, to him, and more than once, and so far without visible effect.

"I did say something to him, when he was home last, about going down to visit his Jersey relatives, and, maybe, hinted that it might be well for you two to know each other."

The old man moved uneasily in his chair while he gave utterance to this feeble prevarication; but Mary saw that there was more behind his words. And Robert had not come. He had felt, without doubt, like resenting the meddlesome plan, as did she. And yet she was conscious of a momentary feeling of anger at his indifference. He might, at least, have taken the pains to come and see what this cousin was like, who had been thus thrown at his feet.

"And are you sure, uncle, that your suggestion did not come too late? Cousin Robert must have met more than one pretty girl. How do you know that he has not lost his heart already out there where he is?"

"That isn't at all likely," the old man said shortly. "He knows well enough that I'll have no tramping soldier's daughter brought here to waste the property. No, no! the sooner he gets out of the army, and settles down with a good, sensible wife, the better."

"Yes, uncle, if he can be made to think so."

"But he shall think so!" the old man replied angrily. "He shall think as I say, or he shall have nothing of mine."

Mary Lane said no more. She rose up from the table, and went and stood before a small miniature hanging upon the wall. She had noticed it often; but she had never scrutinized it until now. It was of a boy just entering his teens (her cousin Robert, whom she had never seen), an open, boyish face, with thick and rather long red-brown hair, brushed away from a tolerable forehead,—the picture of a frank and rather handsome boy in his first pride of youth, and bright buttons; for he was in his cadet's dress. It was hardly fair that she should decide her future from this picture, by which she would never have recognized the dashing soldier-cousin now. But she was not thinking of that at all. Her uncle's angry mood had startled her as much as his proposal had shocked her; and scanning the square jaw and firm mouth, with a kind of pleasure, too, in the frank face, she felt that he might find it yet a difficult matter to bend this will to his.

"Never mind Robert," the old man said,—he was a little ashamed of his outburst of temper, and fancied, like many another angry person, that he had shown all he felt,—“it is of you I wanted to talk.”

What should she say? how should she answer him? for, however much he might beat about this question,

an answer he would have, she knew. Of course she could make but one reply; but she was mortified and pained to find that his interest in her had only been for the furtherance of this scheme. And yet it could not have been entirely on account of her cousin Robert; for had he not owned to a desire to do something for her as well? It must be that he had loved her a little for her own sake. And how could she vex him now in his own house? And yet she must make him understand that this thing was impossible. She did not ask herself why it should be so; but she knew in her heart that it was not to be considered for a moment, even though her cousin Robert should come and ask it of her himself; which he certainly seemed in no haste to do. She came slowly away from the picture to the fire.

"Uncle, you speak of cousin Robert's preference; but—you do not think of me. It would be wise,—it would be worldly wise, I mean," she went on hurriedly. "But what if this should not be to my mind?" She looked steadily into the fire, and again the color reddened her cheek: her very throat was warm as she continued, in a voice hardly more than a whisper,—

"Every woman cherishes a possibility which she would find hard to give up."

"Don't talk in riddles," the old man said testily, shifting his feet. There seemed to be behind these soft-spoken words a power of resistance not pleasant to consider.

"I mean," she said, slowly lifting her eyes, though the red flew to her hair, "that no woman would be willing to assent to any thing which would put it out of her power to marry the man she loved,—if love should come to her." The last words were hardly above her breath.

Her gentle beauty touched the old man's heart. Surely Robert could not do better.

"But why should not that be Robert?" he asked with a smile. "You have left no one at home?" he added with sudden suspicion, his face darkening again.

She shook her head gravely.

"I would not turn my hand over to please any one of them."

"And of course there is no one here," the old man said savagely, making a fierce thrust at the fire. "They are all strangers to you, good enough in their way, pleasant acquaintances; but" —

"Yes, uncle," she assented slowly. She screened her face as the fire blazed up under the poker in the old man's hand.

"Then, why shouldn't it be as I wish?" he said in a more persuasive tone. "For I do wish it very much, Mary."

"But it isn't for me to say," she replied, beginning to tremble, yet trying to speak lightly. "You would not have me offer my hand to cousin Robert, or tell him that he might have me for the asking?"

"No; but I would have you say yes when that time comes."

"Then let us wait until it does." She bent over and kissed his forehead; then she hastened out of the room.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE HEIR.

BUT nothing came of the old man's scheme, as we know very well. Mary Lane finished her visit before spring, and went to her home without having heard any thing from her cousin Robert. By the exercise of some tact, she avoided any fresh discussion of this subject, which was by no means pleasant to her. But she could not avoid all reference to it, or to that possible time when she might rule and reign here in her uncle's house. So annoying did these suggestions become, that she was heartily glad at last when the time came for her to go; for she was becoming more and more conscious of a feeling which would make it impossible for her ever to accede to her uncle's wishes. The possibility which she had blushinglly assured him to be so dear to a woman's heart had become a surety now. She would have returned to her home the promised wife of Tom Akers, but that there seemed a kind of disloyalty in giving a pledge so contrary to the wishes of her uncle while still under his roof.

In the mean time old Mr. Brock fretted and fumed inwardly that his nephew made no response to the suggestions which at last had almost taken the form of a

command. Captain Elyot's letters were cheerful and gay as usual, — they had wonderfully brightened the old man's life for a year past, — but there had been no reference whatever to the subject which had begun to engross the latter's mind. Toward spring these letters ceased entirely. At first uncle Jeremy attributed this blank to the difficulty of communication between East and West, and the irregularity of the mails. But he was beginning to feel serious uneasiness, when, one morning early in the summer, Bunce laid an envelope beside his plate addressed in Robert's well-known hand. The sunbeams seemed to quiver in the old man's eyes as he hastily opened it. He read, his face growing purple, the veins swelling in his forehead. Then he twisted the letter out of all shape, with a sudden, angry wrench, and, turning about, threw it into the waste-paper basket.

“What is it?” asked Miss Bunce with real anxiety; for the old man choked and swallowed over what almost sounded like an oath. “Mr. Robert is well, I hope?”

“Send in the breakfast, Bunce. How many times have I told you that I will not be kept waiting? And don't talk to me about ‘Mr. Robert,’ as you call him. The fool has gone and got married!”

Later, Miss Bunce found the letter, and read it, having smoothed it out carefully with an iron. It was the one written immediately after Captain Elyot's marriage to Blossom, — full of a lover's praises of her sweetness and beauty. There was no reference to her fortune, though that would hardly have mollified the old man. To his mind, the family had suffered disgrace. With all their wild courses, his sons had never ingrafted the stock with bad blood by a low marriage.

That had been left for his dearest child, his one daughter, to bring about, and now for this young man, who was as his own son. But his wounded pride made him forget the soreness of his heart over this ingratitude. With this blow he turned away from every human being. They were all alike, sycophants and deceivers. Even his grand-niece Mary Lane, toward whom his heart had warmed, failed him with the rest. He wrote her of her cousin Robert's defection, ashamed for the young man, ashamed for himself at having so aroused her hopes, as he believed, but with the sudden determination that the money which was to have fallen to Robert should now be hers: it would in a measure console her. And there came a reply breathing nothing like sadness, but almost a spirit of rejoicing. She assured her uncle that she was entirely satisfied. She even pleaded for Robert and Robert's wife, and at the last half-fearfully announced her coming marriage with Tom Akers, and hoped her dear uncle would be happy in knowing that she was to make her home near his. She would have none of his money: that belonged to her cousin Robert. But the old man swore with an oath that not a cent of it should ever come into the hands of his nephew. It seemed as though the property hoarded so carefully would have to go begging for an owner at last.

The news of Captain Elyot's marriage crept about the town. Every one wondered, and everybody blamed the young man; but no one suspected that the keenest disappointment of all was felt by old Jeremy when bright Mary Lane, in the succeeding autumn, came among them as Mrs. Tom Akers. Even Bunce had known nothing of this scheme. The pride of the old man

had made him reticent as to this affair; but every one knew, in that incomprehensible way by which the most of our secret purposes and wishes are known to the world, that Captain Elyot would not come in to the property now. Who would be the heir?

In truth, the old man was himself at a loss to answer this question. He was neither charitable nor philanthropic. He hated institutions founded for so-called benevolent purposes. He believed that they but served selfish ends, after all. He had no interest in the conversion of the heathen. To him the ends of the earth were shrouded in the darkness of utter indifference. His interest, his life-long striving, had been for himself and for his own: now he must pass away—and his own had failed him.

He must pass away. Others saw that his step grew more feeble, his voice more broken. He seemed to gain his breath with an effort; but to him this passing away was still a matter of a far future. Why should he try to bring it near, or make himself realize that the hand which still held notes and bonds and mortgages with such an eager grasp must soon turn to the dust of the grave?

Who should succeed him? Not Tom Akers's wife. She had enough and to spare. Besides, he had never in his heart forgiven her for what he chose to call her deceitful conduct. She had kept something back when he had believed that he saw every corner of her heart. He had no right to such a wide sweep of vision, to be sure; but, all the same, he had never forgiven her. Who should succeed him? He pondered this question often and long,—too long; for one morning, a year or more after Captain Elyot's marriage, the old man was

found dead in his bed. Azrael had been merciful, and had stolen from his summons its terror. He was found with as peaceful a face as though he had taken his money with him upon his long journey.

As he had deferred making a will until such a time as he could decide how to dispose of his property, months had slipped by, and he had made no will at all. The very delay for the purpose of finding a successor to Captain Elyot made that young man his heir after all. He was next of kin, and came into the estate.

Nothing had been known of him since the report of his marriage. The unlucky are soon forgotten; and who could be more unlucky than he who was believed to have lost all claim to the property by this unfortunate step? The most absurd stories began to circulate as soon as his good-fortune was known. They all hinged upon this marriage, which had so nearly cost him his inheritance, and gathered at last into one which came to be almost believed, since there was no one to deny the truth of it. He had fallen in love with a pretty young Indian girl: he had married a half-breed in that wilderness which had swallowed him up.

And now, would he come here to live among his old friends? Above all, would he dare to bring this wife? The thought of an Indian squaw domiciled in the Brock house, of a pappoose, — for there was doubtless a child, though no one knew, — a pappoose swinging in its cradle of bark from the long limbs of the old elm at the foot of the garden, brought a virtuous shudder to more than one frame. It was enough to make old Jeremy turn in his grave.

But time passed on; and nothing was known of the intentions of the heir. It was autumn when the old

man died. Winter came; and the snow drifted in upon the neglected pathway to the door, or lay where it fell, and there was no change. The old house alone seemed utterly unmoved by all these strange reports. It did not so much as open its eyes. The spring was slipping away at last, and curiosity had nearly exhausted itself. Even the children had ceased to flatten their faces against the wooden bars of the gate, looking for a wigwam which never appeared, when a bit of authentic intelligence came to the wide-open ears of the townspeople. Captain Elyot had lost his wife, not recently, but soon after his marriage, and he had no present intention of occupying the Brock house. He had given up his commission, and gone abroad for an indefinite time. The house was to be let.

“But did she have Indian blood in her veins?” More than one eager feminine voice asked this question of mild Mr. Simpkins, the agent of the property, and old Mr. Brock’s man of business, — a quiet, retiring old gentleman, engaged in the practice of law in the neighboring city. He had been quite overlooked till now, when he came to examine into the condition of the house, and see that it was put in order for possible tenants.

“Indian blood, my dear lady? What do you mean?” he asked in return. Bunce was going over the house with the agent, putting away the more personal effects of her old master. One or two of the neighbors had run in to inquire the occasion of all this bustle. It was almost believed that Captain Elyot had arrived at last. Even Mrs. Tom Akers, seeing the windows opened for the first time in so many months, and being as much in the dark in regard to affairs as her neighbors, had stepped in to ask the cause.

"Why, they do say that Captain Robert married a half-breed." It was the little widow, Mrs. Mincer, who had ventured to broach this subject, half confidentially, while Mrs. Akers's back was turned.

"Nonsense!" said Bunce shortly, before Mr. Simpkins could reply. "I saw the letter myself" (she did not think it necessary to say how); "and he described her as a sweet young lady,—as sweet as you could wish to see." Pride in the family, with past favors as well as future possibilities, made Bunce wary in her communications.

"Then, why was Mr. Brock so angry? You said yourself, Miss Bunce, at the time, that the old gentleman had disinherited Captain Robert on account of this marriage."

"Well, perhaps I did." Bunce was down upon her knees before the old-fashioned locker, sorting out the quaint old decanters and glasses hidden away in its lowest receptacle. One could hardly lie in such an attitude. "It was true, as Mr. Simpkins knows. I remember the morning as though it was this blessed day. It was at the breakfast-table that he opened the letter; and, when I came in with the coffee, my hand shook so that I poured it all over the cloth. I thought the old gentleman would have had a fit that time, for sure. The doctor"—

But Mr. Simpkins interrupted her.

"Come, come, Miss Bunce, I shall have to hurry you a little. It's time I was getting back."

"There's only the bed and table linen now," Bunce replied, getting up from her humble position. "I might look it over by myself; that is, if you'd trust me, sir. I had the buying of the most of it."

"To be sure, to be sure, if you'll lock every thing up carefully;" and the agent took himself away. If the housekeeper chose to gossip about the affairs of the family, it was nothing to him. But he could not countenance such a proceeding by his presence.

The door once closed after him, there was more of ease in the small party.

"And you thought he would have had a fit," prompted one, seating herself comfortably in one of the leather-covered chairs of the dining-room.

"Yes. It was such a surprise, you see, and not to Mr. Brock's mind at all, though she was a beautiful young lady, he wrote."

Mrs. Akers felt her cheeks burning, as she moved away from the group standing now before the china-closet, and mingling their exclamations of surprise with others of admiration for the cups and plates brought from Holland by old Jeremy's ancestors more than two hundred years before.

"We never used them. No, ma'am. Mr. Brock prized them as he did his eyes, and would hardly let me dust 'em. Nobody knows what'll become of them now."

"Oh! Captain Robert will marry again. He'll be coming home from over the seas with a new wife before long."

Mrs. Mincer wiped her eyes.

"I don't know. When one has once" —

"He was dreadfully cut up over her death," Miss Bunce broke in. "I should say that he would never marry again."

"More than likely," murmured Mrs. Mincer, from behind the folds of her heavy veil.

"But I can't see now why the old gentleman should

have resented this marriage, if Captain Elyot's wife was so lovely," persisted the first speaker.

But Miss Bunce held back the one item in the surreptitiously-read letter which explained this. Mrs. Akers might know, even though she had not been on good terms with her uncle before his death. Since she did not choose to speak, the housekeeper was wise enough to keep silence.

Mary Akers was moving about the room, filled with reminiscences recalled by every object here. She had entered the house but seldom since her marriage, and then with a strange formality. She paused a moment before her cousin Robert's miniature, with a vivid recollection of that other morning, so long ago, when her uncle had made known his wishes to her. All this might have been hers, — not the house alone, with its handsome old furniture, and wealth of *bric-à-brac*, collected from many a land (for old Jeremy had spent many years of his later life in wandering over the seas), but all this money over which her friends were gossiping idly now, wondering at the strange fate or providence which had dropped it at last into the hands from which the old man would have withheld it. It might all have been hers, not alone if she had married her cousin Robert, but if she had consented at the last to stand to Uncle Jeremy in Captain Elyot's place. But she could not do that. And now justice had been done at last, without any human agency as it seemed. Her cousin had come into his rights; for it was right that he should have this money, after being made to believe for years that it was to be his. And she rejoiced in it. She would like to write to her cousin Robert, and tell him of her gladness (a happy wife, she could do so now without fear of

being misunderstood); but she did not know his address. In what foreign land he wandered, or in what strange city he had taken up his residence, she had never learned. She had not thought to put the question to Mr. Simpkins when he was here. She would stop at his office in town some day, and ask for this address.

The announcement of the death of her cousin Robert's wife had put all other thoughts out of her mind for the time. So she was dead, — this girl for whom he had hazarded and almost lost every thing. No wonder he had taken it to heart, as Bunce had said. He must have loved her dearly to have risked so much for the happiness of possessing her. Mrs. Akers had never credited the various rumors in regard to this marriage. But few of them had reached her, since she was within the sacred pale of the family. She had heard enough, however, to realize their absurdity. Other people believed that the old man could not have turned his nephew away without good reason, which they proceeded to invent. But she had a key of her own to her uncle's anger. People said that the old man waited to find an heir to his property; but she hoped it was not so. She could not but hope that he had relented at the last, though too proud to acknowledge it perhaps; and this she should tell her cousin Robert when she wrote. It might take the fire from the gold dropped into his hand.

She did not realize till now how a dream had been slowly gathering in her imagination, of the time when he would come here to live. She had grown up without sisters; but might not cousin Robert's wife take the place of one to her? Mrs. Akers had known something of

the contents of the letter which the young husband wrote with such fearless pride. Uncle Jeremy, in writing to his niece of this marriage, had quoted Captain Robert's words in scorn; but she had more than half believed them, and felt a strange pity now for this girl who had brought such brief joy to her husband. As she wandered at will through the familiar rooms of the old house, she found herself crying, almost before she knew it. Uncle Jeremy had been very kind to her at one time. She remembered it now, sitting in his chair before the empty, blackened fireplace; and yet her tears were less for him than for this girl whom she had never seen.

CHAPTER XXX.

A STRANGE FAMILY.

IT was one day early in the summer that the Brock house was found to be inhabited again. A long, fierce storm — “the May storm” — had raged for days, compelling the ladies upon the square to keep within doors ; and it was during this time that the family must have arrived.

Summer burst suddenly upon the town with the breaking away of the clouds. The turf behind the high wooden wall of the Brock house turned a vivid green, the leaves upon the horse-chestnuts in the street unfolded at the first touch of the sun’s rays. Mrs. Mincer, coming slowly along the High Street, threw back her veil to mark these changes, surprised to see that even the early rose over the door had put out its leaves since the rain. She sighed to reflect that there was no one here to rejoice over the coming of summer. And then she noticed, for the first time, that the blinds of the windows looking upon the garden were open. Could Miss Bunce have forgotten to close them the day when she had gone over the house ? Or it might be that the late high winds had unloosed the worn fastenings. Mrs. Mincer was a care-taking little woman, and was

hesitating over the propriety of stepping within the gate, should she find it unlocked, and closing them herself, when, to her utter bewilderment, she met the gaze of a pair of soft brown eyes directed to her from one of these unscreened windows. She had only time to observe that they were set in a pale young face, and that the figure to which both belonged was draped in black, when the vision disappeared.

Mrs. Mincer was startled. There was something ghostly in the apparition. She found herself quaking and staring, broad daylight though it was. What did it mean? Then a very natural and simple solution of the mystery suggested itself. The house had been advertised to let for some weeks. Retracing her steps, she saw that the placard had been removed from the front-window. Some one had taken it at last.

A few steps farther on she met Mr. Simpkins. She hesitated, but finally bowed with the timid air with which she addressed all individuals of that sex, one of whom she had mourned for fifteen years. She drew her veil more closely, but half checked her steps.

"Mrs. Mincer?" Mr. Simpkins paused politely.

"The Brock house seems to have tenants. I thought I would ask—they might be strangers in town—it would perhaps be a kindness"—

"Yes, yes, to be sure. I believe they know no one. Mrs. Drake told me, I think, that they had no acquaintances here."

"And Mr. Drake?" Mrs. Mincer said inquiringly. It was as well to know something of this family.

"There is no Mr. Drake. Mrs. Drake is a widow."

Mrs. Mincer was so much moved by this announcement, that Mr. Simpkins was embarrassed. He re-

proached himself inwardly for the abrupt manner with which he had imparted this intelligence.

"With children?" came in an almost inaudible voice from behind the pall draping the widow.

"There are two daughters," Mr. Simpkins replied cheerfully, glad of a diversion, — "the elder, a young lady in rather delicate health, I should say; the younger, a mere child. You were thinking of calling? Very considerate in you, as they are undoubtedly strangers in this vicinity. Mrs. Drake seems to be a woman of peculiarities, but of means, unquestionably of means (she has consulted me in regard to some important investments); and the daughters — the elder, at least — might prove a desirable acquisition to your delightful society here. I should say, call certainly." And Mr. Simpkins bowed and passed on, letting himself in at the gate of the Brock house.

Mrs. Mincer had forgotten to ask from what place the family had removed, as well as why they had chosen to take up their residence in this town, neither handsome nor well situated, it must be owned. But all this would be explained in time. Mrs. Drake herself would probably offer some information as to her antecedents and previous circumstances when her neighbors called upon her, — for Mrs. Mincer had already decided that everybody would call upon the new-comers. For herself, she should only wait for a suitable time to pass. There was a similarity of condition between this woman and herself which could not fail to create a bond of sympathy.

She carried the small scrap of information gained from Mr. Simpkins to her friends around the square, each one of whom evinced a willingness to show some

attention to these strangers. In the mean time a most natural curiosity was excited. Who were these people? and where had they come from? No one knew, unless it might be Mr. Simpkins, and he was quite out of the reach of their questions, his residence and place of business being in the adjoining city. Nor had he been seen upon the square since the day when Mrs. Mincer met him so opportunely. Even the ordinary judgment instinctively bestowed upon strangers was impossible here, since no one except Mrs. Mincer had so much as caught a passing glimpse of any one of these people during the fortnight in which they were considerably left to themselves. It was certainly a most quiet family.

After a period of waiting sufficiently long for the strangers to become settled in their new home, the ladies in the neighborhood began to show their goodwill; and, before a week had passed, a flood of visitors poured in upon the Drakes. They came away surprised, and more than one of them indignant, having been coldly received by the widow, who had been impenetrable as to her past, as well as rudely indifferent to the friendly advances of her new neighbors. She was variously described by them, but always in terms of amazed derision.

“Really, what did you think of her?” asked Mrs. Mincer of Mrs. Stryker, — Mrs. Colonel Stryker, who led the society of the town. “She seems to be not quite — that is, not thoroughly” — an expressive shake of the head finished the description.

It was Saturday evening, and a small party of ladies had gathered in Mrs. Stryker’s drawing-room. The curtains separating it from the tea-room, which they had just left, were drawn; the long French windows

opening upon the balcony overhanging the street had been thrown wide open to admit the breeze which set the grass to quivering upon the monument mound over the way, and sent little puffs of white dust dancing down the street. Chairs and sofas were drawn up here; and a peace toward all the world, with a desire to mildly criticise its weaknesses, had fallen upon the company. It was then Mrs. Mincer spoke, bringing up the subject which had already been touched upon at the tea-table.

"We shall see," Mrs. Stryker replied, with an equally mysterious air. "I have hardly made up my mind. They are certainly not what we had reason to expect. Still I do not regret having called. It is better to be disappointed, or even imposed upon occasionally, than to neglect strangers who might repay our civility by appreciation, if nothing more. But I am surprised that Captain Elyot should have let the house to these people. He might have considered his old friends, even if he were indifferent as to who should occupy it."

"You forget, Captain Robert had nothing to do with it," ventured some one. "It was in the hands of the agent."

"And he urged me to call," said Mrs. Mincer, with almost a shudder. She had found no kindred spirit in Mrs. Drake.

"But he told you at the time that she was a woman of peculiarities?"

"Peculiarities indeed!" laughed another. "But did you notice the changes in the house? Some very handsome furniture — for the drawing-room, I fancy — was being carried in as we came away."

"Somewhat after the Queen of Sheba style, was it not?" amended Miss Gore, whose elegance was of the severe type.

"But *Miss Drake* is extremely pretty," broke in Amy Stryker, meeting this tide of criticism with the assurance of one whose word would carry weight. "Did you not think so, mamma? Or she would be if she were not so frightfully pale. And I am sure nothing can be said against *her* manner."

"I confess I scarcely noticed her," Mrs. Stryker replied, "except to observe that she looked ill. I am glad if you found any thing to admire, Amy. Though her manner, which seems to have impressed you, could hardly have been an inheritance from her mother, who was extremely ungracious, and appeared incapable of uttering an intelligible word. I tried her upon various subjects; and whether she was obtuse or sullen I could not determine. It seemed almost as though she considered our visit an intrusion. We were not asked to repeat it, which I should not think of doing under any circumstances."

"You have aroused my curiosity," said Mrs. Akers, stepping in from the balcony, where she had overheard this conversation. "I shall certainly call now. I fancied from all accounts that these people were simply common and ill-bred; but this savors of a mystery,—their utter seclusion (for they appear to receive no one from abroad), their evident desire to be left to themselves, a pretty daughter in delicate health"—

"I fear you will only be disappointed, my dear," said Miss Gore, making a place for her friend upon the sofa beside herself. "The widow is only common and ill-bred, and the daughter scarcely pretty, I think. The only mystery, to my mind, is that which always attends the sight of ignorance in high places; for Mrs. Drake arrays herself gorgeously (if widow's weeds

can bear such a description), and the house is being made hideously fine."

"And you think"—

"That they are only vulgar rich people, with whom we have nothing in common. It was a mistake from the beginning; but the best way to rectify a mistake is not to repeat it. And, by the way, did I see you at the *matinée* yesterday?" The subject was changed. The conversation turned into another channel.

But Mrs. Akers did not forget it. Her curiosity was thoroughly aroused, her anger nearly awakened, that people of this order should desecrate and make over the home which had been so pleasant to her at one time. How could her cousin Robert permit it? Or was the agent acting beyond orders? She determined to go and see for herself. Some vague idea of remonstrating with Mr. Simpkins, or even of addressing a letter to Captain Elyot, crossed her mind.

Accordingly one afternoon, not many days after this conversation, she found herself lifting the latch of the gate, and following the familiar path to the door of the Brock house. The house might be transformed within; but outwardly there was no change, she could see, as she stood a moment waiting for the summons upon the old-fashioned knocker to be answered.

An untidy servant-girl tardily respond to her knock, and, after a moment of hesitation,—it almost seemed of doubt as to admitting her,—ushered the visitor into the parlor. As the door swung open, a picture of the well-known room rose like reality before Mary Akers's mind,—the dull old room, lying always in a dim half-light, its tone made sombre by time, full of queer old china jars, and odd, irregular cabinets in shining lacquer-work,

with a picture or two, dim enough to be originals and glowing with the unquenchable light of genius, within the dead gilt frames; the satin fire-screens worked in tent-stitch, the colors as faint as the memory of the woman who wrought them; the odd diamond-shaped mirror on the mantel, with its frame of Venetian glass, which gleamed like an opal when zigzag rays of light crept through the shutters and struck upon it. She saw it all. Then she stepped over the threshold into a room gaudy with bold-faced colors, crowded with useless furniture, crazy with ill-assorted *bric-à-brac*, and staring at itself in showy mirrors. She looked about her in bewilderment. She could hardly believe the place to be the same. But the girl was still waiting; and she remembered that she had yet to send her name to the owner of all this magnificence. She almost repented having come here, as she dismissed the servant with her card, while she searched about for the least gaudy among the gilded and beflowered chairs in which to await her return.

The servant had but partially closed the door after her. What was Mrs. Akers's surprise to hear, all at once, voices as if in alternate rebuke and deprecation! One was that of the slatternly maid, who seemed to have merited an angry reproof. For what? All that her friends had said of the ungracious reception they had met here rushed upon Mrs. Akers's memory. But the cessation of the voices, and a sudden swift rustle of stiff drapery, announced an approach. It was too late to retreat now, as for an instant she had been tempted to do in a spasm of ridiculous and inexplicable alarm.

She half rose from her seat, her heart quickening its beating, to meet this vulgar, pretentious woman, who

had not even the grace of ordinary propriety; but she was surprised out of all preconceived judgment, and almost out of her forced self-possession, when Mrs. Drake entered the room. The widow was tall, with the figure described as "commanding." Her face, which must have been handsome once, was broad at the forehead, and strong in the lower jaw, indicating both power and daring. No petty vulgarity here. And yet, with these grand characteristics in countenance and bearing, there was something indescribable, which gave them the lie. Was it the slight stoop into which the shoulders fell after a moment? the covert glance from the long, half-shut eyes smouldering and burning, by turns, behind the lids? Mrs. Akers could not tell; but, after the first glance of surprised admiration, she was conscious of a feeling of distrust. She could but notice the incongruity, too, between the mourning-dress, showy and expensive, even to the widow's cap covering the dead-white hair, and the coarse, rough skin, which could have known no early care. Nor could the *lissee* frills at the wrists conceal or soften the hands, roughened and misshapen, as by hard work. The verdict of her friends had been just in one particular,—Mrs. Drake was no "lady."

She was like a story made in one language, and repeated awkwardly in another. The woman was evidently out of accord with her present surroundings; but there was nothing flaunting or pretentious in her bearing or her speech: on the contrary, she seemed, at times, rigid with a shyness too proud to show itself. Ill at ease she certainly was; but "common" or "vulgar" she could never be called.

But all these observations were not made at the first

embarrassing moment, for Mary Akers was hardly more at ease than her hostess. Some ordinary words of greeting, oddly formal on the part of the widow, passed between them, when the visitor became aware that her daughters had quietly followed Mrs. Drake's rather startling entrance, so quietly as to be unnoticed for a moment; the younger, a mere child, bashfully clinging to her sister's gown.

"And this is your daughter?" Mrs. Akers said cordially, rising from her seat.

An expression of love, almost like pain, swept across the mother's face. For one brief moment she forgot herself.

"Yes, that's Em'ly," she said simply, as a slight, languid figure, dressed in black, crossed the floor. Amy Stryker was right: if the outline of the sweet, listless face had been fuller, and its tint less pale, the girl would have been undeniably pretty. Indeed, she was scarcely less than that now, with her unconscious grace of manner, so unlike the mother's perturbed, watchful air.

"And what is your name, my pretty dear?" addressing the little one. The visitor tried to free Miss Drake's gown from the child's dimpled hands. "Come and sit with me, will you not? See what I have to show you. — What is her name?" she asked, turning to Mrs. Drake.

A sudden dark flush covered the widow's face at this simple question. Emily's head had been bent over the child. She raised it now to reply.

"*Her name is Remember,*" she said in a strange, vibrating voice.

Why was it that the light words upon Mrs. Akers's

lips were checked? Her hand slid from the child's arm, and utter silence followed. Who were these people? And was it her imagination alone which enveloped them with an atmosphere of mystery?

"And are you quite at home here? Will you like our town?" The pause, which no one attempted to fill, was becoming awkward.

"It does as well as another," Mrs. Drake answered in a hard voice. "They're much alike,—just houses and streets and faces one never saw before. We may as well stop here a while."

"Then you do not intend to remain, to settle permanently." She was surprised within herself at her strange interest in these people.

"Oh, no, no!" the widow said, twisting her hands restlessly.

Emily's reply had been in a lower voice.

"I would like to think so," she said. And her listless face showed something almost like interest.

"Emily's not fond of change," Mrs. Drake said quickly. "She would have staid in B——"

"Did you come from B——?" Here was something tangible at last. "Then perhaps you know my dear friends the Carruthers? You must know them."

Again the widow's dark eyes opened with a flash of doubt, suspicion—what was it?—and again it was Emily who took up the question, and replied,—

"We were there but a few weeks, and made no acquaintances."

Silence would have succeeded Miss Drake's quiet reply, but that Mary Akers made one other effort.

"I regret to hear that you are something of an invalid," she addressed herself to Emily. "The air here

is quite unlike that of B——: I trust it may prove beneficial to you."

"Who said she was an invalid?" the mother asked harshly. "Speak up, Em'ly, and tell her they knew nothing about it.—She's been ailing a while; the heat has worn her out: but the sea air'll soon set her up. The doctors said so. *We've tried 'em all.*" Anxiety that was like terror, faint hope yearning for confirmation, all showed in the burning eyes fixed upon the visitor. They compelled her to speak.

"I hope so, I think so, indeed," she said warmly; and moved to an unusual expression, drawn strangely toward this young girl, she laid her hand upon Emily's, resting in the lap of her black gown. Then she rose up to go.

The dining-room door stood open as she passed out. She was glad to see that there had been fewer alterations here. But her cousin Robert's miniature was gone. It had assuredly hung here the morning when she ran in to find Bunce putting the house in order—for these people, as it had proved. Involuntarily she stepped into the room; then, aware of the intrusion, retreated hastily with an apology.

"The house is both familiar and dear to me," she said. "Some of the happiest weeks of my life were passed here a few years ago. It was my uncle's house," she explained, still lingering.

"Yes, I know," the widow said with repressed impatience. "Him that's travelling in foreign parts. The agent told us."

"No, oh, no! That is my cousin. Mr. Simpkins must have explained"—

But Mrs. Drake evinced no interest in these family details: her hand was already upon the door.

"I daresay — I don't know," she said absently. "'Twas all the same to us. The house was advertised, and Em'ly wanted to come; though why she should I don't know. It's but a poor place. It'll take a deal of money to make it at all fine."

"I like it best as it is," Emily said timidly. "It seemed like coming home. We have been in so many strange places" — she began. But her mother interrupted her hastily.

"Sick folks have their fancies," she said.

But Mary Akers took up her words.

"And you'll grow to be more and more fond of it, I hope, as your health comes back, until you will never wish to go away again." But the miniature — she must ask if Bunce had removed it. "My cousin's picture used to hang here," she said, pointing to the spot where she so well remembered having seen it the last time she was here. "The housekeeper, perhaps, has laid it away."

"Was it a faded thing in soldier clothes?"

"It was not quite fresh, I am afraid; but then" —

It was impossible to resent the unconscious impertinence of the woman: it was equally useless to explain why the picture had a value to her aside from the brightness of its colors.

"Em'ly took a fancy to it: it hangs in her room. — You may as well give it to her, Em'ly."

"No, no! Indeed I have no claim to it at all. Although we are cousins, we have never met," the visitor said hurriedly, mortified to see with how little interest her voluntary communications in regard to the family were received. "You will come and see me soon, I hope," she added as the door was opened for her to pass out.

Emily's eyes appealed to her mother.

"Thank you, ma'am," Mrs. Drake replied with cold dignity ; but she made no promise. And when she had closed the gate after her, and was walking away from the house, it occurred to Mrs. Akers that she, as well as her neighbors, had not been asked to repeat her visit.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE LUNCH-PARTY.

THERE was certainly something very mysterious about the family. This was the universal judgment rendered at last upon the Drakes; though Mrs. Akers kept her own counsel as to her call, adding nothing by word or look to the general suspicion. She even found herself taking their part,—the part of these people who were nothing to her, and who (the widow, at least) had been any thing but civil to her. She tried to understand it. Some sympathetic chord between herself, strong, young, and happy, and this poor Emily Drake, had been feebly touched. It was this which made her screen the family, so far as she could, from the arrows of scorn showered upon them; for the small community had been disappointed, not to say shocked, and feared it had committed a grievous error in thus taking up these people whose antecedents were unknown. It had not even the late satisfaction of dropping them again, since the Drakes showed themselves by no means anxious to turn these much-regretted civilities to account. The calls, made from various motives, — in which curiosity had a large share, — were never returned. They ignored all invitations, and repelled every advance to-

ward further acquaintance. They seemed to desire only to be left to themselves; and to this, the small circle making up the society of the town at last consented, with a severity which showed something of pique.

Mrs. Akers alone would not give them up. Poor Emily Drake's life must be a lonely one. It would be no more than Christian charity to do what she could to brighten it. The girl had not been unresponsive: it was the mother who had watched, checked, and repressed her. Why did she thus act the part of a dragon over her daughter? "She's a tartar," was Mrs. Akers's mental comment, reviewing her visit, "and leads the poor girl a dreadful life, I am sure." And, being both courageous and warm-hearted, she determined to become as intimate with Miss Drake as circumstances, twisted by her own hands, would allow.

When some weeks had elapsed, and no notice was taken of her visit, she prepared to repeat it, ostensibly to ask after Miss Drake's health, which must suffer from too close confinement within doors. She filled a small basket with fruit fresh from her own garden, and tied her pretty chip hat under her chin, prepared for a most neighborly and unceremonious call. A great quiet hung over the place as she pushed the gate open. The blinds of the house were closed, and no one was in sight; but, as she raised the knocker, she fancied that the laugh of a child came from the lower end of the garden, and that something white moved in the shrubbery there. Could it be the child and Emily? But, no: when the same untidy maid who had let her in before answered her summons, she was assured, with a half-frightened glance of the girl over her shoulder, that Miss Emily was confined to her room with a headache. Mrs. Akers

could only leave her basket, and come away, having no desire to encounter the widow again, even supposing that Mrs. Drake would have received her. The little empty basket was left at the door, "with thanks," the next day.

"But who brought it?"

"A servant, ma'am."

So Miss Drake had not taken the trouble to leave it herself. Mrs. Akers had clung to a frail hope until now. And there was only this cool, verbal message. She would not persist after this. She then and there resigned all interest in the Drakes.

But the Fates were stronger than her resolves. She met them, mother and daughter, at their own gate, less than a fortnight after this rather mortifying visit. As she came along High Street, she met them face to face. They had come up from the lower town, and, turning the corner suddenly, could not well avoid her.

"I am glad to see you out. The air will do you good; or perhaps you do not fancy our east winds?" Mary Akers made a bold sweep at Miss Drake, whose pale face brightened with real pleasure at this encounter. She even turned, and walked back to their gate, suiting her steps to Emily's slow pace. "You have quite recovered from your headache, I trust: I was sorry to hear you were ill."

"It was very kind in you to remember me. The fruit was delicious. You will think it strange; but I had never eaten raspberries before in my life. I hope you got the basket, and my message," Emily went on shyly, halting between each sentence. So there had been something more than these cool thanks, after all. "I wanted to take them to you myself; but I was not

able," she went on. "I am often not well now," she said with almost childish simplicity, merely stating a fact, by no means asking for sympathy.

"I am afraid you stay too closely within doors. — She needs a little change," Mrs. Akers said boldly, to the widow, who was standing uneasily by her own gate now, as though she wished herself and her daughter safely behind it. "I am sure a little society would do her good. Let me take her home to lunch with me. — Are you fond of pets?" addressing Miss Emily again. "I have quite a menagerie, and the prettiest pair of white mice in the world, sent to me only yesterday."

At the mention of the mice the girl hardly restrained a shudder; but a soft gleam crept over her face at the kindly, heartsome words.

"If I might," she stammered, appealing to her mother, whose countenance was perplexed and forbidding.

"And you too. Of course I wish you both to come." It was hardly true. But she could not carry Emily away alone, she saw at once, nor at all, but for this unexpected attack, in the face of which the widow could not rally. She found herself and her daughter borne off before she knew that she had given her consent to this most unwelcome proposition.

Once in her own house, Mary Akers set herself to entertaining her strange visitors. She brought out the white mice, and a wonderful learned cockatoo for Emily. Poor Miss Drake's nerves were not strong enough to bear the sight and the odor of the strange little creatures. Even the parrot's hoarse voice thrilled her unpleasantly; but she turned with real enjoyment to a large cabinet of curiosities in one corner of the room, the contents of which had been gathered from many lands. She evinced

little interest in the explanations Mrs. Akers kindly offered; but it was enough that she appeared amused, and pleased to turn the articles over in her hand, struck by the bright colors or the strange forms, as a child might be.

It was not so easy a matter to entertain the mother, who hardly concealed her disgust for the mice, and looked coldly upon the parrot's accomplishments. She did not care for such things, — turning her back upon the cabinet, before which Emily still sat engrossed, — nor for any thing else, her hostess thought in despair, after trying her with the whole circle of ordinary topics of conversation. She sat in uncomfortable erectness upon her chair, as though ready to fly at the first opportunity, her long, half-closed eyes taking in every thing at the corners, her ears, keen as those of an animal, startled at every sound. If she had been a prisoner longing for a chance to escape, she could not have been more keenly observant; if she had been intrusted with secrets of state, she could scarcely have been more guarded in speech.

But two people cannot sit face to face in a drawing-room, utterly silent; and Mrs. Akers was still making these futile efforts to establish something that should at least simulate conversation, wishing with all her heart that luncheon would be announced, when suddenly an entirely unlooked-for diversion occurred. There came a little, startled sound from the corner where Emily was bending over the cabinet, hardly loud enough to be called a cry; but in an instant the widow was upon her feet.

“Em’ly! What is it, Em’ly?”

The girl stood swaying on the floor, her hands clasped

together, a strange excitement and pallor upon her face. Her mother seized her in her arms, hushing her, almost threatening her, it seemed to Mary Akers, but in words too low to be caught. The parrot, who had gone to sleep in a corner, its ruffled head under its wing, roused by the excitement, burst out now, "Ha, ha! Dead and buried! dead and buried!" ending with a diabolical laugh.

"Hold your tongue, you jade!" cried the widow harshly to the bird. But the girl in her arms fell back in a dead faint.

This was a fine condition of affairs for a quiet household. The servant-maid, throwing open the doors from the room where the lunch was set out, offered a shrill scream, instead of the announcement upon her lips, bringing the other domestics from the kitchen. But the widow motioned them all to a distance. She laid her daughter upon the floor, sprinkling her face with the water Mrs. Akers had brought after the first expression of fright. Silence fell upon them all: even the parrot, over whose cage a rug had been thrown, was shamed into quiet.

It was but a brief fainting-fit. While Mrs. Akers was dismissing the gaping company of servants who still hovered in the doorway, Emily came to herself, sat up, looked about her in surprise at her strange position and surroundings; then, gathering her recollections, burst into tears, and hid her face in her mother's bosom.

"Now, her hat, if you please, and mine," said Mrs. Drake.

"But you are not going? Let me give her a glass of wine. She will be quite herself in a moment;" for

Miss Drake still sobbed feebly. "These lifeless summer days" — began Mrs. Akers, politely ignoring any other cause for this sudden illness. Lunch had been set out with more care than usual, to do honor to these strange guests: it was a pity that it should be for nothing. Then, too, she could not bear to lose sight at once of these people, who were only more mysterious, the more closely they were brought to sight. Assuredly some explanation would be offered for this unusual scene.

"I don't mind if you give her a glass of wine," the mother said. "But we'll go home, if you please: it's but a step."

"I'll send for the carriage, then; or at least call" —

"Nothing at all, ma'am; though we're obliged to you all the same. She can walk now. — Can't you, Em'ly?"

The woman had forgotten herself, and fallen into a servile manner of speech, which did not escape Mrs. Akers's quick ears. "She has known nothing of society; she has been a servant, or — or something of the kind," that young woman said to herself, as the dragon did indeed put on her bonnet, and lead her daughter away, without a word of apology or regret for the disappointment and trouble they had occasioned.

When they had gone, and she had taken her solitary lunch, by no means pleased with this unexpected ending to the morning, Mrs. Akers returned to the drawing-room to remove the extinguisher from poor Poll, who was still in disgrace. As she passed the cabinet, her foot struck some small object upon the floor. It was only a diminutive Indian moccason, embroidered with beads, which had found a place among rarer arti-

cles of curiosity. The girl's sleeve had perhaps swept it from the shelf. It did not occur to Mrs. Akers, it never crossed her mind for an instant, that this trifle, forgotten as soon as laid down, could have had any thing to do with poor Emily Drake's illness.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A VISITOR AT THE BROCK HOUSE.

SOME time elapsed before any thing more was seen of the Drakes. A succession of visitors, with the gayety this occasioned, followed immediately upon the heels of the interrupted lunch-party, sweeping away all thought of the incident from Mrs. Akers's mind. She did send the same evening to inquire after Miss Drake, who was quite recovered, the servant brought back word. And there all intercourse seemed likely to end.

It was several weeks after this that she was driving home from the adjoining city, where she had been to dine with a party of friends. The carriage rolled slowly up one of the quiet streets skirting the park, — grand now with an iron railing, concrete walks, and a soldiers' monument, but then only a damp, neglected playground and thoroughfare, shaded by handsome trees, — when a slight figure, with a child by its side, came slowly down one of the diagonal paths in the soft darkness, under the brooding elms. Other figures passed swiftly to and fro: this alone lagged feebly, resolving itself into shadows at last, as the sweeping branches seemed to gather it from sight.

As the carriage swept around a curve, it suddenly

stopped. Two trembling hands rested upon the window-sash; and Emily Drake's tired face, a little flushed at this moment, looked in at the window.

"You will think me overbold; but indeed I wanted to tell you—to thank you— What must you have thought that day?" she began hurriedly. There followed what sounded like a suppressed sob; and a tear wet Mrs. Akers's hand, laid over Emily's. Dear me! Was she going to cry here in the street? or would she faint again? Mrs. Akers's thoughts had been miles away from Emily Drake at the moment of her appearance. She could hardly gather them or her sympathies upon such sudden demand.

"My dear," she said hurriedly, with that practical forethought so destructive of sentiment, "don't stand there: the evenings are chilly, and the park is wretchedly damp. Get in;" and she made a movement to open the carriage-door. But Miss Drake shrank back into her shell of shy reserve at this proposal.

"We have not yet finished our walk," she said in a different voice, and withdrawing a step. "I—I hope you will pardon me for detaining you; but it had been such a long time, and you came so close to us! We were just leaving the park—I could not help motioning for the carriage to stop. I wanted to apologize for causing you so much trouble that day." Her very embarrassment multiplied her hurried words.

"Pray don't speak of it. I was only troubled that you would go away so soon; that you would let me do nothing for you. When one is not well"—

"But I was well,—or as well as usual," Miss Drake corrected her quickly. "I am always weak and nervous now. I daresay you think it is silly. Mother says I could overcome it, if I would make an effort."

"All that will pass away of itself when you are stronger. But what was it, my dear girl? What ailed you?"

"It was only that something brought back the time when I was so happy," Emily answered simply. "That was very long ago, and miles away from here, in a place not at all like this," she added, glancing at the straight row of handsome houses above them, already darkening into a solid wall as the twilight closed in. "Then a great trouble came," she went on in a vibrating voice, as though she were standing at an immeasurable distance from this life which she described, as one might, perhaps, in the next world review the past. "I cannot forget it." It was like the hopeless statement of a fact. Then she burst out with wild passion, "Oh! how can I forget it?"

The excited tone caught the ear of the child. She left off her playing, and ran to pull at Emily's gown.

"Come, come," she lisped, throwing her arms tight around Emily's knees, with an odd little gesture of protection and love.

The girl's face had dropped into her hands.

"Don't, my dear, don't," said Mrs. Akers soothingly. What did it mean? But this was too exposed a place for a scene. "You really must let me take you home." It was no time to ask the girl to explain herself, at least until she was safe within the carriage.

But Emily refused.

"It would only alarm mother if you were to bring me home."

"But you will come and see me very soon, — to-morrow?"

"I—I wish I might; I don't know." The girl had

dropped her veil, and taken her sister by the hand, prepared to move away. "But I shall never forget your great kindness."

Then she disappeared in the shadows, creeping out from the park. Kindness! It followed Mrs. Akers like a reproach as she drove home. Had she been kind? She had been suspicious of these people, almost of Emily herself while this strange scene was passing. The feeling of doubt was gone now. She was ashamed to remember it; but her great kindness had been no more than the sympathy which any human being would give to another in trouble. Poor Emily Drake! Her grief was doubtless some disappointment of the affections. The mother had interfered perhaps. But, if there had been true love, it would claim its own, Mary Akers prophesied with happy philosophy. And as Emily Drake did not come (she had hardly expected it at the time), after a few days the subject was overlaid by others, though hardly forgotten.

The autumn hurried away. White-footed winter followed. Even the spring came round again, and nothing more was known of the Drakes. They had not sufficiently conformed to New-England proprieties to attach themselves to any one of the churches of the town: they had shown themselves in no congregation of worshippers. Each clergyman had felt it incumbent upon him to call, but these visits had been as coldly received as those of the neighbors, and had not been repeated. Even Christian kindness can scarcely force itself upon people. The general belief, by this time, had grown to be that the Drakes had come into a fortune unexpectedly, being but ill prepared for it. Every one agreed to this simple theory, though speculating a little upon

its margin, with the exceptions of Mrs. Mincer, who had no decided views upon any subject, and of Mrs. Akers, who offered no opinion whatever, and knew not what to believe.

But about this time, the last of the spring or beginning of summer, there was a change. A visitor was seen to come out of the much be-watched gate, — a young man, who turned to raise his hat to some invisible form within as he closed the gate after him, thus hiding his face from Mrs. Colonel Stryker, who was passing upon the opposite side of the street. Now, Mrs. Stryker was no gossip; but it would have been beyond human nature in its present fallen state to forbear mentioning this circumstance to the two or three friends who dropped in for an hour's chat after tea the same evening. There had been wanting in its darkest moments but this one element to make the mystery complete. Given, a dragon, a young and pretty girl, — though upon this point there was a diversity of opinion, — and, finally, a young man. Nothing more could be asked for.

"But there is no mystery at all about it," said Amy Stryker. "I saw you, mamma, from across the way, and met him full in the face as he left the house; and it was only Edgar Wyman."

"Only Edgar Wyman!" repeated every voice. "What was he doing there?"

Now, the Wymans were scarcely considered to belong to the "society" of the town; though Mrs. Mincer, Mrs. Wyman's own sister, had crept into a tolerably assured position, partly through her marriage, and in a measure by reason of a certain moral flexibility which made it easy for her to twist through very sinuous passages, and make an entrance by extremely narrow doors. The

Wymans themselves had not always lived in the vicinity of the square. They had come up from some burrow in the lower streets of the town (so it was said), though no one was supposed to be sufficiently familiar with the locality to point it out. They had made their fortunes hastily, and had come up the hill to build a showy house, and put themselves in violent contrast to it at once. As for Edgar Wyman, the only son, since the family had enjoyed its prosperity (for a dozen years now), he had been sent to the best of schools, where, it must be owned, his acquirements had not been great. They had sufficed, however, to obtain for him an entrance to one of the oldest colleges in the country, through which he had passed, having contrived to rub off and bring away very little knowledge, and still less of the good-will of his associates. He was mean to penuriousness, sly, and a sycophant, receiving a kick from those above him without a demur, and passing it on to his inferiors, as he judged those to be who were poorer in estate than himself. In this only was he generous. He was not ill-looking, aside from his pretentious swagger; but even this circumstance, and in a community where young men were at a premium, had failed to make an entrance for him into the best society of the town.

“He always was” — began some one, taking up the conversation. Then the sentence, with its unflattering accent, was choked back.

Everybody looked at Mrs. Mincer.

“I do not understand it in the least. What can it mean?” she gasped.

“I am inclined to believe that it means nothing at all,” said Mrs. Akers, “except that the poor girl is at last making friends among us. For myself, I am glad to think it is so.”

She remembered the interview at her carriage-window, of which no one of her friends knew any thing at all. And was Emily Drake forgetting her "great trouble"? She could hardly repress a momentary contempt for a sorrow that could find consolation and forgetfulness in such an one as Edgar Wyman.

"It must have been he who came out at the gate two nights ago, as we drove by from town," said another. "It was certainly the figure of a man, though it was entirely too dark to distinguish his face." And then, by comparing notes, it was found that this mysterious figure, mysterious no longer, had been seen many times of late slowly passing the house, or going in and out at the gate.

Whatever secrecy there might have been in these visits at first, there was none from this time. Edgar Wyman went openly and often to the Brock house now. And whether from the influence of his new associates, or because he found himself all at once an object of interest, he began to wear a fresh air of importance by no means well-fitting.

"It is her money. He cannot really feel any interest in that poor, pale creature," Mrs. Mincer said, with an animation which savored of anger, turning upon her own family, after trying in vain to learn from her nephew the occasion of these frequent visits, or at least some account of how the acquaintance had begun.

"Why shouldn't I visit them?" he had said. "Didn't you all run there when they first came to town? I'm a little late, to be sure; but it was the tortoise, you know, who won the race." By which it will be seen that the young man had not studied the classics in vain.

"But, my dear Edgar, no one goes there now," Mrs.

Mincer knew nothing about tortoises or races, except that the latter were in very ill taste, and not considered select by the best people.

“And why don’t they go there now?” He laughed in a quiet, exasperating manner as he answered his own question, “Because they know they’re not wanted; because they were never asked to come again. The old woman is a” — what, Mr. Edgar did not say; “but the elder daughter is a confoundedly pretty girl, and I shall go there when I please.”

This conversation Mrs. Mincer reported word for word to her friends. It demonstrated nothing, to be sure, except the manly spirit Mr. Edgar Wyman had developed; but of this Mrs. Mincer was rather proud.

“He said the old woman was a — what *is* the old woman?” queried she, when her story was ended, referring to the only mysterious point in what had been an unpleasantly plain statement of facts.

“She is a dragon,” Mrs. Akers replied with a good-natured laugh. “And your nephew is quite right: she does not wish us to call upon her. Why shouldn’t she choose her own friends?” Unconsciously she bristled to the defence of these people.

They were rising from a social tea-table as she spoke.

“I must go,” she said to her hostess. “I have friends coming from town: they may have arrived already. So I must run off like a beggar, with hardly a ‘thank you.’” And she made her adieus, and left her friends to discuss Emily Drake and her new acquaintance at their leisure. She was glad of an excuse to leave them. It had been upon her tongue more than once to tell the little she knew of the girl. But she would not: it would be a betrayal of confidence. And yet the temptation was

strong. She turned the corner of the square rather hurriedly from the impetus of this resolution. The soft, early twilight was slowly gathering, melting the sharp angle at the top of the granite shaft above her, laying deeper shadows upon the trees about the mound, and idealizing the two figures moving slowly along the walk at a little distance before her. A young man and maiden they seemed to be. There was a drooping, listless air about the girl, a languor in her walk and the slow sweep and trail of her gown, which could not be mistaken. It was Emily Drake; and the young man could be no other than Edgar Wyman. So indeed it proved, when the more hurried step of the woman had brought her nearer to them. They had reached the end of the square by this time, just beyond which was the Brock house. At the gate they separated, the young man going on without looking back. The girl stood for a moment in the open gateway. The vine-covered trellis over the house-door behind her made a background of dark leaves, against which the slight figure dressed in black was thrown out like a silhouette. A figure of despondency it might have been; the head drooping, the hands clasped loosely before her, and holding her hat, whose long black ribbons trailed upon the ground. Certainly happiness, if that had indeed come to her, had made little change in poor Emily Drake's appearance. She turned to go into the house, giving a little start at sight of Mrs. Akers, who had taken up her flounced skirts at the moment to cross the dusty street toward her own home, upon the other side of the square.

"Good-evening," the latter said, with a cheerful little nod to the girl. Two wistful brown eyes seemed to

follow her as she crossed the street, urging her to return. "What does ail the girl?" she said to herself impatiently. There was something almost exasperating to the woman of strong nerves and a happy nature in this moping figure with its mysterious trouble. She glanced back as she passed the corner. Emily still stood in the gateway. "But why should I interfere?" she thought, with that putting-away of responsibility in other people's affairs which is sometimes as culpable as interference. It was late; her friends had arrived already, perhaps; and she hastened her steps. "Why did I not go back?" she asked herself long afterward, when it was too late.

A good angel had whispered to her; but she would not listen. She went on to her home, and met her friends, and forgot the wistful eyes, and the dark, slender figure standing dejectedly in the gateway.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

“SHE’S NOT GOING TO BE WORSE!”

IT was not long after this that a report crept around the square that Emily Drake and Edgar Wyman were engaged to be married. The story was authenticated by Mrs. Mincer. But for her, it might have passed on and away; since there was absolutely no one, if we except the butcher and the grocer, who held any communication with the Drakes. She, however, declared it to be true. She had received it from Edgar Wyman himself. It was an official announcement; but even she did not hesitate to discuss the matter, and, as Edgar became more communicative, she dropped various hints as to the strange ways of this young girl whom he had won. He hated a black gown; and she had refused to lay by her mourning, though her father had been dead some years, four or five at least, now. It came out that he found her often weeping — at what? She had accepted him without an objection, and was presumably happy. What did it mean? “It almost seems as though she had had another lover, and lost him,” some one said fearfully, for Mrs. Mincer was present when this remark was made. “Another lover!” the listeners to this fanciful suggestion exclaimed contemptuously.

It was impossible always to remember Mrs. Mincer, who, poor thing, was not of much account after all, and bore no resentment. But no one of them believed that pale, spiritless Miss Drake could ever have had another lover. Mrs. Mincer, having with many sighs let fall these dark suggestions of happiness not without alloy, was obliged to explain them away as best she could. The woman had no firm standing-ground in these days, between contempt for this girl and a desire to uphold her own family.

But, while this not entirely unfriendly gossip went on, there was no perceptible change at the Brock house, save that Edgar Wyman went in and out with, if possible, a more swaggering air of single proprietorship than ever. The family still kept to itself. Mrs. Wyman, a meek woman, as faded in spirit as in complexion, had, at Mrs. Mincer's suggestion, asked her son if she were expected to call.

"You stay away, if you don't want to spoil every thing," was the filial response of the young man. And no one of the family, besides Mr. Edgar himself, had extended a hand to the Drakes. Even Mrs. Akers seemed to have lost her slight hold upon Emily, who was seldom seen beyond the gate. But at one of the windows overlooking the garden, in the early twilight, as the summer wore to a close, Emily's shadowy figure often appeared, her little sister leaning over her shoulder, or held tight in her arms, or alone, her face lying on her hands, while she gazed out and away in a reverie which seemed rather of memory than of hope. People fancied that her face grew whiter day by day, and shook their heads with a touch of pity over the girl who had moved them to little besides curiosity until now.

“Poor Emily Drake!” they began to call her. Poor Emily, indeed, who might have been pretty Emily, fresh and young and happy for years to come, if only some one could have spoken the words she would have almost died of joy to hear!

The girl was fading away. By the time the apple-trees in the garden had shed their withered brown leaves, she had ceased to leave the house. She still sat in the window at nightfall, until the long evenings with the early twilight came on, and the drawn curtains shut in the vision of the sad face. It was weeks before it became known that she was really ill, not until Edgar Wyman began to show symptoms of annoyance; for in this form his anxiety displayed itself. Could it be that his triumph was to end here? for a triumph he considered his relations with this family. Had not others striven, and failed? He had aimed beyond them all; and could he lose all now? Would Fate be so hard upon him as to allow this girl, with all her wealth, of which there was no need to feel a doubt, — would Fate curse him by letting her vanish like a shadow, slipping out of his grasp, where he could neither follow nor bring her back? His alarm became too great to be concealed, and yet he was half ashamed to acknowledge it. Real feeling of any kind he had been accustomed to put out of sight as soon as possible, since it was usually of a kind to do him no credit. But, failing in this now, he strove to cover it up with weak complainings and self-pity, honest enough, alternated by seasons of moroseness, hard to be endured by his own family, but doubly trying to Mrs. Mincer, through whom the kind-hearted ladies upon the square hastened to offer any assistance in their power. Was Miss Emily’s appetite feeble? Any little

delicacy — Did she require a nurse? It was Mrs. Mincer's unpleasant task to receive her nephew's ungracious and even rude rejection of all such aid as was proffered, and translate it into the language of polite society.

Mrs. Akers alone employed no ambassador.

"I am sorry to hear that Miss Drake is seriously ill. Is there any thing that a neighbor could do for her — or for the family?" she asked boldly of Edgar Wyman, stopping him at the very gate of the Brock place one morning. Something had tugged at her heart of late, very like regret or self-reproach. Had she done all that she might have done for this girl?

"Thanks; nothing at all," the young man replied stiffly. "She has every comfort and attention that can be procured." Even at such a time as this, his true, boastful self would come to the front. He lifted his hat, and would have passed on; but she still stood in his way.

"It would give me great pleasure to call. A friend from outside can sometimes suggest" —

"She is unable to see visitors." How he rejoiced to show his power to one of these people who had scorned to notice him — until now!

"But you have consulted a physician, I trust," persisted Mrs. Akers, who felt her spirit taking up arms within her at his tone, scarcely removed from insolence.

"We have done every thing necessary. I think you may trust us," he added with a disagreeable smile. "We do not consider her case hopeless, by any means." And then he did at last escape, leaving Mrs. Akers in a most disturbed state of mind. She still stood upon the sidewalk, directly before the Brock house. The cur-

tains were drawn aside from one of the upper windows. Was it there that the sick girl lay? For it had crept about, one hardly knew how, that Emily Drake had taken to her bed. "I was so happy for a little while!" she had said. "How can I forget it?" What was it that she could not forget? She, Mary Akers, had decided in her own mind, that it was some misplaced attachment, some hope rudely shattered, which time would build again. What if she had been mistaken, after all, and a real trouble and grief which never could be set right had befallen the girl? It was this possibility, inwardly vexing her, which had stirred up regret, keen almost as remorse.

People jostled her as they pushed by,—men hastening to their business, children late for school: some of them nodded and stared to see her standing there. It was morning, a late October morning, raw and chill. A rollicking north wind came down the street, whistling to the leaves, which were like crisp red gold: they danced about her feet, and, whirling into the air, almost touched the window which she had fancied to be Emily's. What if the girl were to die? She started with a sudden resolution. She would see Miss Drake: once more, if never again, she would see her face to face. What was it that the girl longed to tell, the very burden of which was breaking the poor heart? She pushed the gate open, and hurried up the walk to the door, a sudden terror pressing her, lest she should even now be too late. An air of desolation pervaded the garden. The dead leaves lay where they had fallen: only the besom of the wind had disturbed them. The summer flowers had died upon their stems, or scattered their seeds at will, their stalks bent and broken by storms. Even the

rosebush over the door, once so carefully trained, had fallen away from its fastenings, and flapped dismally against the house. The knocker gave out a hollow sound at the touch of her hand, as though it could arouse only echoes. She was hesitating, unwilling to strike it again, and yet resolved not to quit the door until it was opened to her, when it was cautiously slipped ajar with a faint echo, and the face of the maid she had seen before appeared in the opening. It was a dull countenance; but the last trace of intelligence was swept from it at the sight of this visitor. She still held the door ajar, to be sure, but seemingly from inability to close it through the sudden disturbance of her faculties.

“I want to see Miss Emily, my good girl. Is she very ill?”

Before the servant could reply, a voice sounded from above and behind her, from the top of the dim broad stairway, it would seem. And, if it had come from still more aerial heights, it could hardly have brought greater terror to the poor maid, who shrank back, letting the door slide open. It was a woman's voice, harsh, though repressed.

“What is it, Nora? Send them away. We don't want any thing.”

“It's a lady, ma'am, as would like to see Miss Em'ly.”

Then the visitor stepped into the hall.

A dark figure came hastily down the stairs in a kind of rush, as the maid closed the door, standing upon the last, as though to bar the way. It was Mrs. Drake “the dragon,” but so changed, that, for a moment, Mrs. Akers almost doubted if it were she. The deep red of

her face had changed to a sickly color, almost livid in the dim light of the closely-shaded hall. Her eyes seemed to have burned their way into her head, where they smouldered now like exhausted fires. Her dress was untidy in its arrangement, the shawl thrown over her shoulders awry ; and she stood, without a word of greeting, as though waiting for her visitor to declare the object of her coming. There are certain conventionalities of speech which become so much a part of ourselves as not to be, even under the strongest excitement, entirely thrust aside or forgotten. But the words which come of themselves fled from Mrs. Akers's tongue at this moment, and she stood utterly speechless and confused before the strange figure.

"What is it? What did you come for? We have sickness in the house, and cannot see visitors. — Nora, why did you let her in?"

It was so far beyond rudeness, the refined rudeness of society, that the very shock of surprise restored Mrs. Akers's mental equilibrium.

"I have not come as an ordinary visitor," she said quietly ; "but knowing your daughter was ill — Do let me see her!" she burst out warmly. "Only for a moment. I will be very careful ; I" —

But the woman upon the stairs threw out her arms, and grasped the heavy rail upon either side.

"You can't see her: no one can see her. You have only come to find out" — Then she paused, an expression of terror upon her face, and added, with an evident striving after self-control, "It's very polite in you, I'm sure ; but nobody can do any thing."

"But if I could? If she should be worse?"

"She's not going to be worse!" And the fierceness

came back to the mother's tone and manner. "My Em'ly's going to be well. She's better now, and happy, very happy." She threw her head back, and regarded her visitor defiantly.

"I am glad to think so, I am, indeed," Mrs. Akers replied rather faintly, moving toward the door. Was the woman insane? It almost seemed so; and a thought of poor Emily in such hands had very nearly roused her to the point of pushing by the figure, with its rigid, outstretched arms, and seeing for herself how the poor girl fared. But, strangely as the woman appeared, she was still Emily's mother. And what but anxiety and watching could have changed her like this? Certainly the girl would not suffer under the jealous care which seemed more like the fierce love of an animal than the affection of a mother for her child. There was nothing to do but to come away.

"At least, you will tell Miss Emily I called?"

"She doesn't care about visitors," the woman replied doggedly.

"How can you be rude to me, when I came out of real interest in Emily?"

A whirl of indignant feeling had brought Mrs. Akers back from the door, and compelled her to speak.

"She's mine, mine!" the mother burst out with wild passion. The rigid figure gave way at last. She swayed back and forth, wringing her hands in a spasm of grief (for what else could it be?) dreadful to look at. "Nobody loves her but me. O Em'ly Em'ly!—Go away!"—for the visitor, remorseful over the storm she had called down, drew near, and laid her hand softly upon the woman's arm. "Go away!" she said, turning upon her. "Why do you come here to spy upon us? I'd do it again, I tell you."

Some one pulled at Mrs. Akers's shawl. It was the frightened servant-maid who had let her in, and who, from an angle in the wall, had been trying to motion her toward the door. Yes, it was better for her to go. This could be only the raving of a lunatic. But she had gained nothing, she thought regretfully, as she walked quickly away from the house.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

“DEAR CHILD, YOU FORGOT TO TELL HIS NAME.”

THERE come to us in New England certain days in the late autumn, like a recollection of past summers; as though Nature, hoarding her treasures, or disbursing them with a miserly hand, had, at the last, repented, and poured out lavishly of her sweetest and best, — days softer than roseful June, which have so little to do with the outer world, that they cannot be spoken of after the manner of an almanac, but must be reckoned among the tender emotions. If it were not for the haze which hangs over the hills, for the still air, softer than samite, one would know nothing of this season through the senses. The earth is bare and brown; the blossoms have turned to fruitage, and dropped from the trees. The heart alone, at this late moment, awakens to bloom again. All past summers and delights give of their fulness to this time; so that it might be called remembrance, or, possibly, regret for some of us.

It was late in the afternoon upon one of these days, that Mrs. Akers was summoned hastily.

“Oh! please, will you come?” said the Drakes’ maid, who stood at her door, bareheaded, and frightened of

face, catching her breath over her words. "Miss Emily's a-dyin', an' the mistress has a turn."

Then she utterly broke down.

Mrs. Akers waited for nothing more, but, catching her hat and shawl, followed the girl hastily out of the house and through the street. The gate, and even the door, of the Brock house, for once stood wide open. Any one might go in and out at will, now that the awful visitor had come, whom neither bolts nor bars could keep out, and who waited for no summons. No rigid form upon the stairs guarded their passage to-day, or motioned her back as the woman groped her way up their dark length to where the girl who had preceded her beckoned from an open door. With all the dread of the moment, as she stepped over the threshold, Mrs. Akers's first sensation was one of utter bewilderment at the wild, disorderly magnificence of the room before her, — a dazzling, barbaric splendor of color, a crowded confusion of elaborate forms, upon which her eye had no time to rest; for in the midst of all this, upon a bed which might have served in richness for a Pagan altar, lay the girl she had come to see. Whatever the excitement of the previous moment had been, there was only quiet and peace here now. The windows were opened wide; and something of the hush and stillness of the closing day outside seemed to have stolen in.

"I knew you would come," Emily said. "You were always kind. Where is Edgar? he was here a moment ago. And Remember?"

There was a faint stir in the room beyond, the door of which was ajar. A woman's still form was lying outstretched upon a couch, with one arm hanging lifelessly to the floor. Then Edgar Wyman appeared with the

child, closing the door, and shutting out the vision which seemed so much more deathlike than the one before Mrs. Akers's eyes. For the strength which comes often to the dying had fallen upon Emily now. She beckoned to the child, who ran to nestle close by her pillows, while the young man nodded half sullenly to the visitor, then threw himself into a chair by the bedside.

"This is for you, my darling," Emily said solemnly, as though it had been a sacrament, drawing a broad gold ring from her finger, and placing it upon the little hand she held in hers.

The child looked up in happy wonder. What was it that came to Emily's face at this moment, at the sight of which even the woman beside her started? *It was the mother-look.*

"She is mine!" Emily cried suddenly, holding the little one close in her arms, and turning her eyes, big with terror and beseeching, upon her betrothed lover. "It was my wedding-ring! I ought to have told you; but I had promised mother long before. But it cannot matter now. It was for her, — poor mother! — who did every thing for me," she went on hurriedly. "I was very young. It was away out on the plains, farther away than you can know of, that I met him. He was an officer at the fort; and he chose ME" — oh the loving pride and wonder in the words! — "though beautiful ladies used to come there to visit. It was summer-time, like this;" and the haze of the Indian summer seemed to have fallen on her face, from which the terror had died away, making it beautiful and unearthly.

"Every one wondered that he should have married me; for father was only the post-sutler, and not an officer at all. But we were so happy! oh, so happy, for a

little time! Mother used to say that he would come into his inheritance some day, and then I should be a grand lady. But I was grand enough being his wife. I was all she had, — poor mother! — for father was dead. And when she found, after a while, that he was not to come into his property, that it was all changed, or there had been a mistake from the first, — *though never any mistake in his love for me*, — she could not forgive him. That was after he was ordered away to carry despatches to a fort in the north. He went with the others,” — in the eagerness of her recital she raised herself in the bed, — “yes, he went away with the others, and — he never came back! They were attacked. They were all killed but two; and he never came back. I cannot remember, for I was ill. But we came away. It seemed very soon; but mother said there was nothing to stay for now. Still, when we were once away, and I had gained a little strength, I begged to return, I begged even to go and search for his body; but they said that could not be. I did not believe he was dead; for at the last, when he was going away, and I felt my heart breaking, he said, ‘I *shall* come back to you.’ And so I knew he would,” she added simply. “And what if he should return, and find us gone, no one knew where? But mother would not go back. She hated the place she said, where nothing but trouble had come to us.

“Then by and by the baby came, and still I did not believe that he was dead, though I felt that I had not long to live. I used to lie awake at night, and think he would return some day, and how sorry he would be to find the baby, and not me. So I named her Remember. Oh! he would remember what I had been to him and he to me, and love her because he had once loved me. We

moved from place to place. I could not rest; and mother let me have my way. Father had left more money than we had dreamed of. We were rich, though I was never to be a great lady. Another year and more (two or three, it may be) dragged by. I scarcely know. It was a weary time, though it seems short enough to look back on now. Mother used to cry over me in those days, and say that I was lost to her; I might as well have died. She urged me to forget that time and him, to give the child to her, and begin again. It would be all the same, she said. We should never be separated. But I could not. How could I forget? I would not listen to her, not till long afterward, when I was tired and weak, and worn out with contending; not until I knew that it would not be for long, that nothing would be for long to me here. And then at last — do you think he will blame me for it? — at last I began to feel that he would never come, that he must be dead, and that nothing mattered any more. I would try to make poor mother happy, and he would know — oh! wherever he was, he would know that I never forgot; that I only waited for the time when I could go to him, since he could not come to me. I was tired of the noisy cities: so we came here, and — you know all the rest.” Her eyes had turned again to Edgar Wyman. “You knew that I had no love to give to any man,” she said solemnly. “You knew — I told you.”

He did not seem to have heard her.

“And that is your child?” His words came sluggish and thick, as though he were drunken. “And you deceived me from the first?” He was bending over her, his face white with passion. He seized her arm, and shook her in her bed. “I will never forgive you while I live!”

The child screamed. Mrs. Akers sprang forward with an exclamation of horror; but the man had staggered out of the room. The door swung heavily to after him.

A change had come over Emily's face, pressed close to that of the sobbing, frightened child, — the change which can never be mistaken. But the woman holding her in her arms must ask one question. A dreadful fear possessed her.

"Dear child," she said, "you forgot to tell his name. Who was your husband? Who was this man that you loved so?"

A kind of wonder spread over the girl's face. "I must have said it." Then, with loving pride, "His name was Elyot, Captain Robert Elyot."

"Oh, my dear, my dear!" Mrs. Akers cried in a passion of remorse. "Did you never know — has no one ever told you" —

The girl rose up in the bed, terror and doubt, and an awful longing in her eyes. "What is it? What could they have told me?"

Then she fell back upon the pillows, dead.

CHAPTER XXXV.

“YOUR COUSIN’S WIFE! CAPTAIN ELYOT’S WIFE!”

TO the people of the town where she had been living, the announcement that poor Emily Drake was no other than Captain Robert Elyot’s mysterious wife came with a painful shock. At first it could not be believed. But Mrs. Akers confirmed it, with tears, as she repeated the story she had heard from the girl’s own lips. “I was strangely drawn to her from the first,” she said. And then out of her full heart she told all she had ever known of the Drakes, and especially of Emily, without sparing herself.

There was no need to make a secret of it now. Every one must know the truth sooner or later. Of course it would be necessary to communicate with Captain Elyot at once. He was somewhere abroad. Mr. Simpkins had his foreign address, — the address of his bankers, — and had from time to time assured Mrs. Akers of her cousin’s good health, and that Captain Robert had no present intention of coming home; so that he doubtless heard from him. But why was he wandering in strange lands, mourning, as every one believed, the loss of this young wife who had but just now died? Very little had been known of Captain Elyot of late

years. Contradictory reports of his having suffered or escaped capture at the hands of the Indians had reached his friends not long after his marriage. But suffering or heroism in the Indian country does not count for much, as every one knows; and the most of the story had exhaled in being blown across the continent. Then, too, it had come at a time when the young man was in disgrace on account of his low marriage and his uncle's displeasure, and when interest in his fortunes had well-nigh died out. Although no one was inclined to doubt this part of the young wife's story, it added not a little to its complication. It must remain, for the present, an inexplicable mystery how the two had become separated, and what strange chance, for it could hardly be regarded as a providence, had kept them apart, unknown to each other, and unknowing of each other's fate, so many years.

But one question was repeated again and again by the kind-hearted ladies of the square: How could it be, that in their intercourse with this family, brief and rare though it had been, no one had chanced to mention Captain Elyot's name? Each one recalled, now that it was too late, some particular moment when it might have been uttered, when it must have been, but for the sudden diversion of the awkward conversation into another channel or its abrupt conclusion. The Drakes had shown a fatal lack of curiosity as to their surroundings, or to the family whose house had become their home. Could it be that the widow had feared, or even come to know, the truth? Suspicion pointed persistently to her when the dying girl's story, and every thing that could be gathered in regard to the Drakes, had been looked through and through, and thoroughly

discussed. Had she come between the husband and the wife, separating them for some purpose of her own, or in angry disappointment that Captain Elyot's family had turned away from him? This was more than hinted at by the neighbors, and in Mrs. Akers's presence, with many a sorrowful shake of the head over the disastrously successful result. But the truth would, in all probability, never be known, unless Captain Elyot could bring it to light. Mrs. Drake lay locked in a silence which seemed eternal.

But, though every one else gave free expression to surmises and opinions, Mrs. Akers said nothing, after that one outpouring of her heart. She knew that to herself alone among all these kindly, easily prejudiced people, opportunity had beckoned; she alone might have unravelled the mystery, so unlike what she had fancied it to be, she might have set this matter right, bringing happiness to at least two people, instead of lifelong suffering, and death even, to one. She could have done this but for her coldness, her silly pride, or an indifference more blameworthy than either. She even wondered, a strange dread chilling her through, if this lost chance would not be exacted of her at the last. More than once the words which would have opened the door for her (Mrs. Akers) to speak had pressed against the girl's lips. She could see it all, now that it was too late. When we look back from another world, that clarified vision which will come in reviewing the past must bring a pang of its own, and the "left undone" will weigh heaviest of all against us, if I mistake not. Perhaps, in this case, the woman exaggerated her culpability. Certainly her gentle heart was full of a pain keen as remorse. Her cousin Rob-

ert's wife, whom she had once thought she might love as a sister! She hastened away home to her husband as soon as she could leave the distracted house. It was more than she could bear alone. The burden of her conscience weighed down her hands, and there was absolutely no one, so far as she knew, to assume the care of this strangely helpless family, or even to see that the dead was buried away out of sight. She was nearest of kin, unless it should be found that the Drakes had relatives; and upon her must fall the responsibility of directing the servants, frightened, superstitious, and not disinclined to shirk at this time, when accustomed authority had given way. There was no one but herself to assume the care of the household, where, a few days before, she had been regarded as a stranger.

She despatched a messenger at once to Mr. Simpkins. He would know the quickest and most reliable way of getting word to Captain Elyot. About this there must be no delay. He might be able to throw some light upon Mrs. Drake's affairs. He had mentioned once casually that Mrs. Drake had asked his advice upon certain investments. It might be that her communication had gone beyond mere business-matters. There was one person who had probably been informed of the family connections, if there were any; and that was Edgar Wyman. But, though this thought occurred to her, it came only with a shudder. Never for a moment did the woman dream of calling upon him for advice or aid. To her he would be from this time as though he had never lived. Fortunately he had left town: there was no need to dread meeting him again. But Mrs. Drake — what if she were to pass from this living death to death itself, without waking? If there were

relatives, they should be sent for. Mary Akers was a Christian woman, and responded audibly every Sunday to the prayers of her church. She did not hesitate to declare upon her knees that she (with the rest of the respectable, well-dressed people around her) had "erred and strayed as lost sheep." And yet in her heart of hearts she could not forgive the woman lying in stony silence in the room above her for what she had done. How this separation had been brought about between her cousin Robert and his wife was still as great a mystery to her as to any of her friends, but that the widow had herself effected it, and by some means that would not bear the light, she had no doubt. And now to think that this woman had fallen into her hands to be cared for, and at a time when she was sore from her own remissness (for, viewed beside the widow's probable sins, even Mrs. Akers felt her own conduct to be no more). It was certainly very desirable that some of Mrs. Drake's friends should appear.

"Could we not advertise?" she asked of her husband, the morning after Emily's death, when they had gone over to the Brock house to see what should be done.

"Certainly not. There is nothing for it but to wait till Simpkins comes."

The doctor had already sent a nurse. She had taken up her position at the foot of the bed where the widow lay, in a silence almost as unbroken as that of the patient.

But, before the lawyer could arrive, a servant tapped at the door to announce the doctor. Mrs. Akers had given orders that he should be detained a moment after making his visit to the sick-room. He had been summoned in haste the afternoon before, when poor Emily

was "struck with death," but had not arrived until all was over; and though he had made two visits since, in the sorrowful confusion of the house no one had thought to apprise her of the fact. He was not Mrs. Akers's own family physician, but a stranger from the adjoining town, and doubtless looked upon the sick-room as his own domain, having established his viceroy in the person of the silent nurse, and uttered his decrees without regard to the rest of the house, or any appearance of interest in its condition or management.

"Perhaps you had better see him," Mrs. Akers said to her husband. A natural re-action, after the tense excitement of the past twenty-four hours, had brought a strange feeling of languor, with a sudden shrinking from responsibility, to the woman upon whom all these painful and unusual cares had fallen.

"Suppose he comes in here. Let the girl show him in here," her husband rejoined.

He was standing before the fire in the dining-room, for some one had remembered to light a fire on the hearth, now that the house had taken up tolerably orderly ways again. The room was much the same as when Mary Akers knew it long before. All the silly, showy finery of the rest of the house had been spared here, or possibly Emily's serious illness had put aside any thought of further changes. The pale November sunshine crept in between the heavy faded curtains, and lay across the carpet the crimson of which had dulled to a dead brown, as it did that well-remembered morning long ago, when old Mr. Brock had urged his niece to look kindly upon her cousin Robert. But her cousin Robert, as well as herself, had chosen elsewhere. For poor Emily Drake,—for so Blossom would always be

named by these friends who had known her only as a faded blossom, — for this shy, pale girl, he had risked every thing. Tender as her heart was toward the poor child lying with a still white face upon the bed up stairs, Mary Akers felt a momentary wonder that it should have been so. But the door opened upon the doctor, breaking up and scattering her reverie.

“Ah, Mrs. Akers!” he said, advancing cordially and naturally. They were not entire strangers, having occasionally met at the house of a friend in town. But at the sight of her saddened face, and the plain black dress she had put on out of respect to her cousin Robert’s wife, his own manner became at once subdued and regretful. “This is sad, very sad,” he went on, having shaken hands with Tom Akers, who was a good deal put out of his usual ease by his attempts to show a becoming sorrow over these people whom he had never seen above once or twice. “The young lady was in a bad way, — one of those cases where alleviation only is possible: still I did not anticipate so sudden an end. Some unusual exertion, I should say, possibly a slight shock. Life, at times, hangs by a thread, especially where a remarkably sensitive organization has been worn down by long illness.”

“She was much moved at the last, I cannot deny; still the change had come before that,” Mary Akers answered sadly and thoughtfully. “The shock was for us, — for me,” she went on in a slightly broken voice. “She was my cousin Robert’s wife, — my cousin Robert Elyot, in whose house we are at this moment. What strange chance could have brought them here?” she added, forgetting that her listener could have no idea of what she was talking about.

“Your cousin’s wife? — Captain Elyot’s wife? Do I understand you to say that Miss Drake was your cousin’s wife?” The half-professional tone of sympathetic sorrow gave place to an expression of the most incredulous surprise.

“Did I not say that the shock was for us, — for me?” And with her heavy-lidded eyes, and complexion strikingly pale against the deep black of her gown, Mrs. Akers appeared, indeed, like one who had suffered sharply either physical or mental pain.

“It was only at the last moment that we learned it, — when it was too late,” she added to herself, and almost with a sob.

“I knew Captain Elyot very well at one time: I remember something of his marriage. But I have understood that his wife was dead.”

“So we believed. We have never doubted that he gave up the army and went abroad because of her loss. And yet my cousin Robert’s wife is lying now in this house.” She clasped her hands, and leaned toward him, in her eagerness of belief in the truth of what she was saying.

The doctor was incredulous. He was almost inclined to be angry. How could he have been so deceived? And what did these people mean by withholding all confidence from their physician, after this manner, — if this story were true?

“Pardon me,” he said; “but are you sure there is no mistake? I have had serious doubts of Mrs. Drake’s sanity. In this house, and with certain family circumstances coming to her knowledge, it would not be strange if a disordered imagination” —

But Mrs. Akers interrupted him.

"It was the daughter who told the story, and when she knew that she was dying. Mrs. Drake never knew"—And then she went back to the beginning of her acquaintance with the Drakes, and recounted the whole. It was best that he should know it all. It was due to the physician, who was a wise and honorable gentleman as well, and capable of proving a friend in this strait. But it was an incomplete story at best, she felt. "We do not pretend to understand it," she said at its close. "We only wait for cousin Robert to come home. But you believe now that she was his wife, do you not?" She was so shaken by all she had gone through, that a little matter disturbed her. His grave doubt, strongly expressed, had unsettled her, although it had not brought her to doubt.

"It seems so—it would certainly seem so." The doctor pulled at his beard, and stared doubtfully into the fire. Circumstances, the every-day circumstances with which he had had to do in this family, as well as his own sceptical turn of mind, were against this view of the matter. It appeared to him that Mrs. Akers had looked for no evidence beyond the mere statement of this girl, who, weak and sick, overborne by the strong will of her mother, might easily have been deceived, if no worse. He had risen, and was slowly drawing on his gloves. With all his freshly-aroused interest in these people, he could not forget that other patients were waiting for him. "Could the girl have been deceived?" he asked absently, aloud.

"That would have been impossible," Mrs. Akers said hastily.

"Pardon the doubt, my dear madam; but really I must turn this matter over in my own mind before dar-

ing to offer a decided opinion. We will speak of it again. I shall look in toward night. You will see that the house is quiet; and, for the rest, I have given directions to the nurse. You need not disturb yourself. She is a most reliable person, and will watch Mrs. Drake unremittingly, so as to send for me if there is the slightest change in her symptoms."

"Yes — Mrs. Drake." Mrs. Akers roused herself with an effort. She was going over again in her mind all the circumstances of Emily's story, dissecting it, and examining each part. "I had almost forgotten Mrs. Drake. Will you tell us quite frankly if there is any chance of her recovery? And there was something else, — oh, about her friends! If there are friends, ought we to send for them?"

"If there are near relatives, it would be well to notify them of her condition perhaps; though she may linger in this state for some time, and even partially regain the use of her faculties. But I have really not another moment that I can call my own." And he bowed himself out of the room and the house.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

“AND NOW WILL YOU NOT SEND FOR COUSIN ROBERT?”

IT was not until late in the day that Mr. Simpkins answered the summons made upon him. He had been called away from his office ; and the messenger, despatched in haste, had not been able to find him. But Mrs. Akers, foreseeing some such difficulty, had written a note, which was left to await his return. It was only a few lines ; this, indeed :—

MY DEAR MR. SIMPKINS, — Mrs. Drake's daughter has suddenly died. We are in great trouble. Will you not come to us at once, and oblige yours very truly,

MARY LANE AKERS.

All through the long day she waited for him at the Brock house, sitting alone, dull and depressed, but growing nervously uneasy as the hours wore away, and he did not appear. Her husband had been obliged to go to town ; and the child — Emily's child — she had left in the care of the sympathetic servants at her own house. She was full of forebodings as the time dragged slowly on. Perhaps Mr. Simpkins had never received her note, which, indeed, had nearly come true, since it was overlooked, and only fell into his hands by chance at last.

She regretted not having mentioned Captain Elyot's name in it. The agent would believe that the appeal to him was in behalf of the Drakes, for whom he would, perhaps, be willing to put himself to no great trouble. If she had even hinted at the truth, he would have set all other business aside, and come to her at once. Her husband would possibly call at his office. Why did she not think to suggest it? She walked back and forth the length of the dining-room, unable to settle herself to any one place, as the morning lengthened to noon. Sometimes she mounted the narrow stairs, pausing on the broad landing near the top, to listen for any sound from the room where the widow was lying. But every thing was still, — still as the silence of that other room, into the hush of which she stole at last, a chill, a tremor as of fear, creeping over her as she stood by the bed. But it had passed away when she turned back the sheet covering the figure lying there. All the longing, the agony of desire, to know the truth, had died with life out of the face of the girl. She smiled as though in a pleasant dream. And the woman, leaning over her, kissed her cheek, and, covering her face again, went down to her solitary watch, comforted, though she knew not why.

It was time for the lamps to be lighted ; but the room still lay in a heavy shadow, relieved only by the fire-light, when Mr. Simpkins was announced.

“Eh, what is all this? What's this I hear, my dear lady?”

The birds of the air, or some other irresponsible tale-bearer, had met him on the way with a confused account of strange revelations and dreadful confusion at the Brock house. His manner was hushed, as became a

house of mourning, but bewildered, as he took the chair offered him, while Mrs. Akers hastened to get the girl out of the room.

"Bring a light, Nora, please," she said. And then, when the door had closed after the servant, although she could scarcely see his face for the darkness, she began hurriedly to tell the story, which had lost something of its power to thrill her with horror over its conclusion, now that she had repeated it so many times, making others as well as herself to share in that last painful scene. She had spoken freely to the physician; but she was even less reserved with Mr. Simpkins. She kept nothing back; not even her suspicion that the widow had herself brought about all this dreadful misunderstanding. She set the subject before him in every light in which she had made it appear to herself.

"And now what do you think of it?" she asked in conclusion, when there was nothing more to be related or conjectured.

"It is strange, very strange," Mr. Simpkins replied thoughtfully. But he did not call in question the truth of poor Emily's story as the doctor had done.

"And what ought we to do?" Mrs. Akers went on. "We have really no one to go to, but you. We must send for Captain Elyot, of course. But Mrs. Drake — has she any friends? Did you learn any thing of the family at the time cousin Robert was married?"

"Only that the girl's father was post-sutler at Fort Atchison, where Captain Elyot was stationed at the time. Your uncle Jeremy told me, the morning he came over to my office to tear up the will he had made in Captain Elyot's favor. He was in a terrible rage."

"It was a cruel, unjust thing to do. I never quite

forgave him for it; not, at least, until he died without making another will."

"Perhaps it was, from your point of view. But you must remember that it was a bitter disappointment to him; and his life had been full of these. He had staked every thing upon your cousin. And you will acknowledge, *that*, with Captain Robert's opportunities and expectations, this was not a very grand marriage, hardly what your uncle Jeremy had a right to look for. Mind, I do not say that I uphold your uncle in his conduct. I am speaking of his feelings, and what he naturally expected. And it was a great disappointment. Though I told him at the time, that, in destroying the will, I considered he was acting in a hasty manner, and one which he might yet regret. But Mr. Brock was not a man to accept advice. There were certain other considerations. He had formed other plans, which had to be put aside," Mr. Simpkins added slowly.

Mary Akers knew very well what these other plans were; but she made no response.

"And was there really nothing against the girl but this?"

"Nothing, so far as I could learn. I inquired, with some pains, quietly, thinking your uncle Jeremy might be more reasonable in time. Captain Elyot was a fine young fellow, even allowing that he had made a mistake. It was a pity that he should lose the property."

But Mrs. Akers paid no attention to this panegyric.

"You inquired?" she repeated hastily. "What did you hear? Do tell me all you know of this poor girl. If I could only bring her back!" she added, her eyes filling with tears. The peace and rest of heaven might

be welcome to the poor thing; but there was something almost better for her here, if one would dare to say so. "It was not right for her to die," she said passionately. "Don't call it a providence. Is it a providence when people scheme and connive, or even blunder stupidly, and make every thing go wrong, and others besides themselves suffer?" She was choking with the sobs she tried to hold back. The tears were falling hot and fast into her lap. "I am nervous, as you see," she said after a moment, in which she succeeded in controlling herself; "but this affair has taken hold of me strangely, and I do not feel entirely blameless. But go on, tell me all you learned of the family."

"It was not much," Mr. Simpkins replied, settling himself back in uncle Jeremy's own chair. "You know young Apthorpe was at Fort Atchison a while,—spoke very well of Captain Elyot, too, by the way. He said this girl and her mother were living there alone at that time. The father was dead; had been killed by the Indians some months before, when Captain Elyot saved the daughter's life. I made a memorandum of the statement at the time, to which I could refer if necessary. The particulars have slipped my mind. But this will probably explain the subsequent intimacy, and the marriage which so displeased your uncle. The mother was an odd creature, strong-willed and passionate. She was settling her husband's business-affairs, and keeping up the sutler's store until the arrival of the man appointed in his place. A kind of she-bear, Apthorpe described her, and jealously anxious over this girl, who never left her side. Indeed, only one or two of the officers were allowed to speak to her, I believe, or to enter the woman's house."

"Yes, that is like Mrs. Drake."

"To be sure, though I should not have thought of it," Mr. Simpkins responded. "The girl was very pretty and lady-like, Apthorpe said. She had been educated in the East. 'Elyot need never be ashamed of his wife; though the mother is a devil,' he said. It was a strong expression, which I should hardly repeat in the presence of a lady but for its possible bearing upon present circumstances." And little Mr. Simpkins bowed his head, and stroked his fat white hands.

"And there was money, I think I have heard. Mrs. Drake appears to be a person of means."

Mrs. Akers was too anxious to get at the facts to be particular as to the lawyer's manner of stating them.

"That was the impression at the time. The sutler was said to have left a large property, immense, indeed, Apthorpe said; but that was doubtless an exaggeration."

"Possibly," Mrs. Akers responded absently, gazing into the fire. "And they might have been happy to this day," she went on, "yes, and for years to come, here, in cousin Robert's own home; for he would have left the army, I am sure, if only uncle Jeremy had been kind, and this dreadful woman" —

"Careful, my dear lady," Mr. Simpkins interrupted her. "It has yet to be proved, you must remember."

He looked at the clock upon the mantel.

"Bless me! And I promised to be back in town in half an hour. Now for a little business." With this frank, charming woman beside him, it was impossible to say to what dangerous communications upon family affairs he might not be led. "We are speaking of Mrs. Drake. What do you propose to do?"

“What ought we to do? We do not even know if there are friends, family friends, who should be sent for, or warned of her illness.”

Mr. Simpkins pursed up his lips, and shook his head with an air of doubt.

“If she were poor, I should say not. But it is astonishing what an invigorator money proves to be to one’s relatives, how it quickens the memory, and even prolongs life! I dare say some one claiming kinship with her could be found, if an effort were made. But first let us clear up this mystery somewhat. You had better write quietly to Fort Atchison — stay, I will find out from Apthorpe the address of the officer in command at the time of the marriage. We could have Captain Elyot home at once, if necessary.”

“Where is he? and can you reach him so easily? Oh, then, do send for him! He might even be in time for the funeral,” Mrs. Akers said eagerly.

“Not so fast, not so fast.” And Mr. Simpkins rose, and placed himself with his back to the fire, clasping his hands by an effort which made his round face quite red. “I have his banker’s address in Paris, to be sure but he would hardly return to Paris so early in the season as this. I think his last letter was from some out-of-the-way village in the Tyrol.”

“And did he say nothing of coming home?”

“Nothing at all: it was simply a few words in regard to a matter of business. But, before taking any steps in this affair, we must see if we have sufficient grounds for them. It would be comparatively easy to call Captain Elyot home. There might be some delay, as he has no fixed residence; but we should reach him, in time, through his bankers. But there is another ques-

tion to be considered first. Now mind, I do not wish to throw a doubt upon the story you have been so kind as to relate to me. It is highly probable, I admit. It is consistent, in many points, with what we already know of this family. But can we prove it by other evidence, — as we shall certainly be called upon to do, — and, first of all, to Captain Elyot himself? One moment, if you please,” for Mrs. Akers, astonished, and almost angry, at this sudden turn from concurrence to doubt, would have interrupted him. “Look at the facts. Here is a man who has believed for five years, let us say, that his wife is dead. The grounds of his belief I do not know. They were evidently sufficient to convince him, and to alter the whole course of his life. Now, suddenly, after all these years, a person appears, claiming to be this wife. She dies with this declaration upon her lips, after relating a story, plausible, ingenious (if untrue), but so indefinite as to localities, time, &c., that it would not stand for a moment in law. We have absolutely, so far, no evidence whatever as to the truth of this statement.”

“How can you doubt that poor girl’s story, told when she knew she was dying?” Mrs. Akers said indignantly. “I thought you would come to our assistance. I believed you would bring cousin Robert home; but I was deceived. I am disappointed in you.” Her eyes shone, then suddenly dropped tears. “Give *me* the address,” she went on. “I will send for him. I am not afraid to trust this poor child who is beyond defending herself now.”

“You are too hasty in your conclusions, my dear madam. But it is the way with your sex,” replied the lawyer, smiling still from a superior height of affability.

"I said there was, so far, no evidence. But evidence, let me say, is to be searched for, to be dug up from below the surface of ordinary life. However, any little matter will do for the present, any slight corroboratory testimony to warrant us in sending for Captain Elyot. Suppose we look at once. Have you come upon any letters or papers? Perhaps you can direct me."

"I am afraid not. I simply turned and removed all the keys, since we know nothing of the servants," Mary Akers replied in sudden meekness and shame.

"A very wise precaution."

Mr. Simpkins crossed to uncle Jeremy's writing-desk, a clumsy piece of furniture, half bookcase and half writing-table, filling the space between the two windows overlooking the garden.

"If you will give me the keys, I will begin here."

She offered no objection, but put them at once into his hands. After all, his cool, and she had almost said heartless, manner of proceeding might do more for poor Emily than her hot, unreflecting partisanship. She was ashamed that she had doubted him for a moment, and stood meekly, and still burning with the mortification that had succeeded her angry speech, looking over his shoulder as he unlocked the green-baize doors, and searched both pigeon-holes and drawers for any thing which might throw light upon this mystery. But there was nothing, no letter or scrap of paper, that bore any reference to this matter; only bills neatly tied up in bundles, and leases made out in printed forms, and all quite properly, in Mrs. Drake's own name.

"Do you know of any other receptacle for papers, without disturbing the sick woman?" asked the lawyer,

as he turned the key sharply in the last lock, and pushed his chair back.

"Nothing would disturb Mrs. Drake," Mrs. Akers replied. "Still you could not go there," she added reflectively. "I remember to have noticed a writing-case, a small affair that one could carry in the hand, in" — what should she call this girl, who, it seemed, was not yet proved to be her cousin Robert's wife? She paused, then, drawing a quick breath, added, "in my cousin's room. It certainly was not there in uncle Jeremy's time."

Mr. Simpkins gave a sharp glance at the clock. A foreign mail left the next day at noon. If a letter were to be sent to Captain Robert, it must be mailed within a couple of hours. "May I trouble you to send for it?" he said briskly.

"I will go myself." She lit one of the candles in the shining brass candlesticks over the fireplace, and went and brought it down, not without much trembling, and a shiver of excitement, like fear, as she passed the bed where the dead girl lay. She fancied its covering stirred; or was it the night-wind entering at the open window that touched it, and made it move, as though poor Emily would protest against this attempt to discover her secrets! "It is for you, my poor child! it is to bring him home," she said almost aloud, as she closed the door upon the room which seemed so cruel in its icy chill.

She set the writing-case down upon the table before Mr. Simpkins. It had been a handsome article of Russia leather, but was defaced and worn now, as if from hard service. As she set it down, the candle in her hand suddenly flared, bringing out with startling dis-

tinctness some half-effaced letters stamped in the leather upon one side. They read, —

“CAPTAIN ROBERT ELYOT, 4TH U. S. CAVALRY.”

“Do not open it,” said Mary Akers, laying both hands upon the worn desk which had so unexpectedly spoken to them both. What tender secrets, which they had no right to penetrate, might it not conceal! “Is not this corroboration enough? And now will you not send for cousin Robert?”

“I think we may,” Mr. Simpkins replied, with an air of thoughtful deliberation. “This is by no means conclusive: still I think we may be justified in sending for him.”

CHAPTER XXXVII.

WAITING.

A LETTER was accordingly despatched to Captain Elyot in the lawyer's most terse style. Mary Akers would gladly have taken this part upon herself; but the time was too short to allow of her saying all she desired; and, besides, Mr. Simpkins would not hear to her faintly expressed wish. "No, no!" he said as he buttoned his coat, and prepared to take his leave. "The less said, the better at present. I shall write a few lines only, stating the bare facts."

She knew by this time how exceeding bare Mr. Simpkins's facts would be; but she had no spirit left to contest the point. She only waited in a kind of fever for the reply, which came, after due and long time, from the foreign bankers: Captain Elyot had started a month before upon a tour in the East, leaving no address: his letters were to be written for, later, when he had determined upon his route.

What was to be done now?

"Let them send some one after him. Do, Mr. Simpkins, write again! If he had only been gone a month, they could easily overtake him," Mrs. Akers argued. And the lawyer, being of much the same mind, did send

a second letter to U. Zellweger & Co., No. 29 Rue de Provence, Paris, requesting them to take measures, without delay, to find Captain Elyot, whose presence was required at home. Letters of explanation were already on their way to him at their address, Mr. Simpkins added: and so there were, for by this time Mrs. Akers herself had written, trusting to intercept her cousin Robert. She felt that a woman's sympathy would be much to him at this time, especially if that woman were one of his own kindred, and, above all, that he should be made to know more than the lawyer's formal letter had told of the strange circumstances which were calling him home. She wrote with Mr. Simpkins's guarded consent; for having broken ground, as one might say, by discovering Captain Elyot's writing-desk, other bits of evidence came at once to the surface to prove poor Emily Drake's identity with her cousin Robert's wife. As if these were not enough, at the last moment, the day of the funeral, — for there had been no delay, since Captain Elyot could not reach home in time, and there was no change in Mrs. Drake's condition, — Mr. Simpkins appeared with a stranger at his side. It was no other than Captain Apthorpe, home on a brief leave of absence, whom the little lawyer had met most unexpectedly that very morning upon the street.

"I ventured to bring him," Mr. Simpkins apologized to Mrs. Akers, "in the hope that he might put this question beyond a doubt. You do not object?" he asked in a lower tone. "Remember, he has seen your cousin's wife repeatedly at Fort Atchison."

The stranger had considerably turned his back, and was staring out of the window upon the neglected garden, sear and yellow now, under a November sky.

“I do not object? Oh, no! Why should I object?” But Mrs. Akers put out a hand to steady herself against the table, — a hand dressed in a black glove. The finger of the clock had almost reached the hour. She could hear the feet of the men whose business it was to wait upon the dead moving in the next room. Sometimes a hushed, jarring voice came out. And what if now, at this late moment, it should all be a mistake? She was faint at the thought. There was no time to lose. “Come,” she said, and led the way across the hall into the gaudy drawing-room, all stiff and staring with its great gilt mirrors, but which had never been garnished for an occasion like this. There was no one here except the men who stood at the coffin-head, prepared to cover the face, when Mrs. Akers approached, with a swift, still movement. She motioned them back. Captain Apthorpe stepped to the side of the coffin. He looked at the dead girl, then the blood flew to his face. “What is it? Tell me the truth,” said Mrs. Akers in a strained whisper. She was facing him, compelling his eyes, full of pain and shame, to meet hers. “Is it not” — She could not speak the rest.

“I do not know. It is dreadful that I should have come here. — Simpkins, why did you ask me? It is years since I saw her, and” — But Mr. Simpkins was putting Mrs. Akers into a chair. Her strength had suddenly left her. One of the men who had been waiting at the door brought a glass of water. But she put it away, and rose with an effort. She could hear the wheels of the hearse grating against the curbstone. It had come to take poor Emily to the church; for Mrs. Akers had vowed in her heart that every respect possible now should be paid to her cousin’s wife. The peo-

ple were there already. The minister would be waiting. "Come up stairs," she said almost wildly. "He must see Mrs. Drake."

But Captain Apthorpe demurred.

"I beg of you, don't."

He was astonished and distressed at the position in which he found himself. And would they put him to a new trial? But Mrs. Akers had already mounted the stairs, and was in parley with the nurse.

"She knows nothing, she sees nothing. She has not even opened her eyes," she said to him in a quick, distinct whisper. "You are to follow the nurse."

It was all bewildering to the man. Who was it? Who had not so much as opened her eyes? He did not understand at all. He stepped over the threshold into a darkened room, following a dimly-defined figure moving noiselessly before him. The air of the room was stifled: there was an odor of drugs. Was that the bed looming darkly before him? The nurse had stepped aside. He paused, waiting for her to make some sign. Suddenly, as she opened the blinds, there came a broad sweep of light across the bed, revealing the outlines of a still figure, and a set, gray face with bands of snow-white hair on either side. Was this, too, death? But as he gazed with a kind of horrible fascination on him, the closed eyelids trembled slightly; then they opened full upon him.

"Good heavens! *It is Mrs. Stubbs!*" he gasped aloud.

"Go away, quick," said the nurse, fairly pushing him out of the room; "and tell some one to run for the doctor. She's woke up at last!"

They carried Blossom to the church where uncle

Jeremy had worshipped for many years. All the neighborhood, and more, pressed in; for her story had spread far, — the broken story, which was believed for its very strangeness. And she was “as good as the best of them,” for one brief hour at least. Indeed, if she had been born to her honors, there could hardly have been more tears shed over the poor young thing. And then they laid her away — poor little Blossom! — whose claim to be a lady was only acknowledged at this late moment, and by putting her to rest in the great, grand tomb of the Brock family.

And when all this was over, and not until then, Mrs. Akers was able to turn her thoughts to the widow. She had “come to herself,” the nurse said, when the physician had been brought in haste. But this was only partially true. “Herself” was still a long way off from the fettered body, from the staring eyes that had no recognition in them, not even when the child was brought, — frightened and shrinking at first, but soon only full of wonder, — and led up to the bed. Speech had not returned; and, whether the change were a step toward dissolution or recovery, no one, not even the doctor, would dare say. They could only wait, while the soul lay locked in with its sin, if sin there were. Even this little rift shed no light.

But one outward effect followed this change. At the physician’s expressed desire the child was coaxed every day now to spend an hour in the sick-room. At first awe imposed a strange quiet upon the little creature, who was full of life at other times; but this soon passed away. Was it a fancy of the watchers, or did those expressionless eyes follow the movements of Emily’s child as it played about the room? And who could say

that the touch of the little hands might not yet quicken the dead muscles, or the young voice call to life the sleeping consciousness?

The winter came on earlier than usual this year. It hurried with feet shod in ice after the spring-like days that had preceded poor Blossom's death. But the time dragged to Mary Akers, filled though it was with cares. She was much worn by all she had passed through, and the fever of expectation, which made her start at every strange footstep, and sent the blood to her heart at every peal of the bell. Who could tell at what moment her cousin Robert might appear? She dreaded the meeting; and yet he would not come unwarned. The edge of his grief and surprise — for there must be great and terrible surprise — would be taken off before he reached her. She began to talk to the child of this unknown papa who was coming home to see his little daughter "in a big ship from over the sea." There was something resonant in the words, which caught the little maiden's ear, and brought her from her playthings to stand at Mrs. Akers's knee. There was even something tangible in the idea of a ship to the infant mind, her picture-books having taught her the meaning of this word. But further the young imagination could not go: and Mrs. Akers gave up her attempt at last in despair. Time and opportunity would do more than all her efforts could accomplish toward awakening natural affection. It was only necessary for Captain Elyot to come home. She dragged from the garret at the Brock house the heavy old furniture which had been stored away during Mrs. Drake's rule, and re-arranged the rooms, as far as she was able, in a likeness of what they had been in uncle Jeremy's day. If she had dared, she would have

removed every trace of the widow's vulgar taste. It was all an eyesore and an abomination to her: it was worse than that, it was a desecration; for this old house, where her love-dream had begun, had almost the sacredness of a temple to the woman. But the widow's lease had not yet expired, and Mrs. Akers was by no means sure of the height or depth to which her assumed authority might extend without being called in question. She contented herself, therefore, with removing the objects most offensive to her eyes, under a pretence, even to herself, of extra care. But Emily's room was undisturbed. The key was turned in the lock, and no one crossed the threshold after the poor girl was carried out. As the winter wore away, more than one letter came over the ocean from the foreign bankers in regard to Captain Elyot. He had left Paris a month before Mr. Simpkins's first letter came to hand. At Marseilles he had taken a steamer for Alexandria; but, an accident occurring, the passengers were put ashore at a small port in Southern Italy, to go on as best they could, — some by *vetturino*, to the nearest railway, and others, after a little delay, by boarding the next steamer. While they were still striving to find out which of these courses was pursued by Captain Elyot, a report travelled back to Paris from Alexandria that he was preparing to ascend the Nile. Before the truth of this could be ascertained, a rumor came from Cairo, that he had left that city for the interior, having joined an exploring party.

If this were true, he was practically beyond reach for some months to come, for an indefinite time. The bankers were at a loss how to proceed. They wrote for instructions.

It was well toward spring when this letter reached Mr. Simpkins. He forwarded it at once to Mrs. Akers.

"You may as well give it up, Mary. He will not put in an appearance for a year at least," said her husband.

"O Tom! He will *never* come home if this is true. What shall we do? Those foreign people are to blame. They should have got ahead of him, instead of following him at a snail's pace. Somebody must start in search of him."

"Suppose we go, — you and I. Not to the interior of Africa, perhaps; though we might skirt the edges of that mysterious region," Tom Akers added.

"But the child? We could never leave the child." And Mrs. Akers glanced toward the little figure upon the floor, bent nearly double in its efforts to nurse a huge doll. There was an expression of anxiety upon the woman's face, a slight contraction of the eyebrows, not unusual now. It struck her husband all at once that these many cares were beginning to tell upon his wife. The more reason why she should have a change.

"Oh, she would do well enough! or we might take the little maid along. — How would you like to go and find your papa, — a real papa, with his pockets full of sugarplums?" he added to the little one, who, aware that she was being talked about, through the subtle instinct so alike in animals and young children, had laid her doll down to come and stand beside him. He lifted her to his knee. She had been overlooked at first in the press of suddenly acquired responsibility; but she was growing very dear to these people, who had no children of their own.

"Oh, no! that would never do," Mrs. Akers said hastily. "She could never travel so far. Something might

happen to her. Besides, we should be obliged to move so slowly on her account, that we should miss him very likely. No, Mr. Simpkins ought to go."

"But he may not be able to leave his own affairs."

"Are not these his affairs? And it would be made up to him. Cousin Robert would see that it was no loss." She stooped, and took the child's face between her hands, and kissed it almost passionately, leaving a tear upon the round wondering countenance. Ah, how could her cousin Robert regret any amount of money spent in bringing him home to the child! What would gold be to her, if—she checked the sigh half-uttered as her husband tossed a letter into her lap.

"Who is your correspondent now, Mary? I did not recognize the hand."

"It must be from the Bryces. You know I wrote to Major Bryce a fortnight ago to inquire for Mrs. Drake's friends."

"The list appears rather formidable," as Mary Akers tore open the envelope, disclosing three or four closely-written sheets. It was indeed from Mrs. Bryce, — a long account of the Stubbses, as she called them, and especially of Blossom's story so far as it had come under the eyes of the major's wife. But it was so mingled with ejaculations of horrified surprise over what Mrs. Akers had written, and of self-reproach that she, Mrs. Bryce, had not in some way averted these calamities, as to be almost unintelligible. One point, however, was made tolerably clear by this letter, though it filled Mary Akers's gentle mind with horror. "What will you think," wrote Mrs. Bryce, "when I assure you that a newspaper was sent to us five years ago, or a little less (it was the beginning of winter, I remember), addressed in Mrs. Stubbs's own

hand, and containing among the deaths (she had drawn a line about them to attract our attention) the name of Captain Elyot's wife? She was ailing at the time they went East, and we never for a moment doubted that she had died. It was this moved Captain Elyot to leave the army, and, after searching for Mrs. Stubbs in vain, to go abroad to forget his trouble. If what you write proves true, I am sure Mrs. Stubbs is the cause of it all. I shall never forgive myself for having suffered them to leave Fort Atchison, although, as the major said at the time," etc., etc.

"O Tom! how can I tend upon this woman when I know that she has done this?" said Mary Akers, allowing the letter to drop into her lap.

Tom Akers threw his cigar into the fire.

"This is bad business, Mary. We'll talk it over with Simpkins; and something shall be done, if I have to start to-morrow, to bring Elyot home."

But the result of the conference with the lawyer was, that Mr. Simpkins himself sailed, a week later, for Havre.

The interest of the neighborhood was in no degree abated in the Drakes: it was only transferred now to Captain Elyot and African explorations. Every item of news which bore even indirectly upon the interior of that country was seized upon, discussed, and compared, with reference to this missing individual. But spring stole upon the town again, marshalling all its forces in green, and trumpeting the summer by many an early bird; and still Captain Elyot did not come home.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

COMPENSATION.

THERE is one day in each year when the city of which I have been writing awakens to a new life. It is in the beginning of summer, upon the anniversary of the battle fought here so long ago. Then the old town arises, shakes itself free from its slumbers, and puts on its beautiful garments, flaunts its gay flags, peals its loud bells, and utters its sentiments of liberty and loyalty anew. The square about the monument is thronged; even the grassy terrace from which it rises is gay with crowds of people in holiday attire. Tents for penny-shows, with startling announcements painted upon their sides, spring up as if by magic; booths in which lemonade and gingerbread are offered noisily for sale burst out at every corner; hoarse voices are shouting these attractions; organs are playing, dark-eyed children dancing to the tinkle of tambourines; soldiers are marching with drum and fife or brazen trumpet: one would think that the quiet town had suddenly gone mad. It is the gay, wild carnival of a dream, which will vanish in a night, while within the houses upon the square hospitality smiles and beckons, and outdoes itself.

The day was almost over ; but with the shadows the crowd increased. It was not yet night, hardly twilight, only a softer, faintly-shaded day, evoked, perhaps, by the music beginning to sound in some long-drawn, pathetic air from an unseen point beyond the monument, toward which the stream of people was tending. Upon the more deserted side of the square, within her long French windows, thrown wide open, yet partially screened from the passers outside, Mrs. Akers had gathered a party of intimate friends, somewhat weary after the protracted excitement ; the younger ladies, at least, contented to pose themselves in graceful silence until the mild revelry of the evening should draw them forth. In the street the noisy bustle had died to a low, continuous sound of moving feet and distant voices, — a kind of murmuring undertone to the music floating back upon the drowsy air. The booths were almost deserted. The red-faced woman of multitudinous aprons at the stand across the way had found a moment at last to refresh herself with a glass of her own ginger-beer. An organ-man, dusty and unkempt, yet gay in a scarlet waistcoat, came strolling down the street, and halted before the balcony. He unslung his organ wearily, then, all his manner changing, suddenly struck up a lively air, accompanying himself with a marvellous whistle, while his jaded wife, travel-stained, and sad-colored of face and gown, forced a momentary gayety as she took up her old tambourine. In a moment the stragglers along the now quiet street flocked together ; others drew near, attracted by the merry tones, reviving the spirit of the waning day. The young people who had sat listlessly behind the half-drawn curtains stepped out of the windows. More than one glance of bold

admiration, possibly of envy, was tossed upward to the balcony, with its clouds of pink and white and crimson, its bright eyes and gay smiles, as the languor of the moment before was thrown off. It was a pretty picture, a bit of bright color in the gray and darkening street: so one man, at least, seemed to regard it, — a gentleman, and apparently a foreigner; for after gazing with more than the interest of an ordinary passer, and screened from sight by the deeper shadows of a friendly tree, he crossed the street, and, making his way through the crowd, mounted the steps to the open door, and entered the house. No one of the party upon the balcony had observed him. The organ had come to the end of its merry tunes. As it ceased playing, the hilarity of the two principal actors in the scene vanished in an instant, as though they had been moved by invisible wires connecting them with the organ. The man, heavy and stiff, and stupid all at once, adjusted the straps to his shoulders and moved on, half bent, through the dispersing crowd; the woman raised her battered tambourine in both hands, with a smile upon her lips in which the dull eyes had no part. Everybody leaned out and down. A shower of pennies pattered into the tambourine.

The stranger, in the mean time, had advanced from within to the parted curtains, and stood regarding the group of handsome, comfortable people with a curiosity that appeared almost eager. Recognition seemed to kindle the expression of his bronzed face as his eye passed from one to another, resting last, and with curious attention, upon Mrs. Akers, who stood with one hand upon the balcony-rail, and with her head turned aside to watch this weary, unwomanly figure tramping away.

Some slight, fresh movement, or perhaps the momentary hush of voices at the appearance of this stranger, where all were old friends, recalled her to herself.

"Good-evening," she said graciously, advancing to meet him, yet puzzled to know which of her half-remembered acquaintances this could be.

He was looking with kindly, curious eyes into her face.

"Is this Mrs. Akers? May I venture to call you cousin Mary? My name is Elyot — Robert Elyot."

"Then you received our letters at last," she gasped, forgetting every thing, — the friends around her, — every thing but this matter which had lain like a stone upon her, and had only been rolled away for a little hour.

"Your letters? No. Did you write to me? That was kind." He still grasped her hand. There were tears in the man's eyes. To find himself at home again, and welcomed like this, to know that some one had thought of him when he had believed himself alone in the world, and uncared for, was almost too much of joy.

Mary Akers fell to trembling.

"You have seen Mr. Simpkins?"

"No. They told me at his office that he had gone abroad."

"And he missed you! But the letters — in Paris, at your banker's?"

"They'll follow me, I dare say. I came directly from the East, by way of Gibraltar and England."

But what was it? She had some ill news for him, he could see. She had become quite white, even to the lips, that had forgotten to smile on him. Had the banks that held his money failed? Had his riches, valued so lightly now, taken to themselves wings? Ah, well! he had borne a heavier loss.

"One moment," he said quietly, "till I have spoken with these friends." He called each one by name, pouring out his greetings with a warmth of which he was half ashamed a moment later, for there seemed a strange constraint upon them all. One after another they made some awkward excuse, and slipped away, until he found himself alone with Mrs. Akers.

"Sit here," she said, pushing forward the ottoman deserted by the last one. And yet how could she tell him!

The shadows had grown closer and closer. The moon, like a ghost of herself, appeared overhead, with a train of trembling stars. Still the crowd streamed by, glancing up to stare, or nod and smile, as the case might be. A child strolled slowly across the dusty street, timid, often pausing, yet beguiled at every step by some unusual sight, enjoying a stolen liberty. It was Emily Drake's child, who had eluded its nurse, and escaped from the Brock house, who hung shyly, in view of the stranger, upon the iron railing of the steps now, waiting to attract Mrs. Akers's eye. There was something in the poise of the head, there was every thing in the sweet, upturned face, to recall Blossom. The man, leaning back in his seat, started up.

"Who are you, dear? What is your name?"

His voice held a tone sharper than curiosity. The child swung slowly back and forth for a moment, then lifting her eyes — so like Blossom's! — she replied in the solemn deliberate tone peculiar to childhood, —

"Remember."

"*Remember!*" repeated the man. "O my God! don't I remember!"

"Come here, dear." Mrs. Akers beckoned the child

into the house. And then, in the half-darkened room, with the little one in her arms, and the music and shouts, and many a gay laugh, floating in from the street outside, — a jarring accompaniment, — she told the story I have tried to tell here, with self-reproaches and with bitter tears.

And Blossom, if she did indeed look down upon the heart-broken man who heard it, could have had no doubt of his faithful love, of whom she had said, "How sorry he would be to return some day, and find the baby, and not me!"

The Brock house was closed once more; for Captain Elyot took his child, and went abroad again a few weeks later, when the widow's death had set him free. Perhaps because she had been Blossom's mother (though she had ruined her life and his), perhaps the awful fear and shame of visiting his anger upon this poor death-bound creature, made him tend her faithfully while she lived. Did she know him? Did she feel the living coals he heaped upon her head? No one could say. She died, and made no sign.

The house was closed; and foolish stories crept about that it was haunted. It was said that Emily appeared at nightfall at the windows overlooking the garden. "If I could believe it," said Captain Elyot, to whom these idle tales came in time, "how gladly would I return there!"

At one of the Elysée balls at Paris during the winter of 187-, a young girl of exquisite figure, and sweet, thoughtful face, came out from the Salon of Salutation, leaning upon the arm of a middle-aged gentleman, whose bearing was almost military in its erectness.

“Who is she — that charming girl in a robe of sea-foam, (is it not?) and with something like phosphorescence shining upon her bosom and in her hair?” asked a young American, newly arrived in Paris, of the young Count d’Alembert by his side.

“Pardon me; but one would know that you had been only twenty-four hours in Paris,” was the reply. “That is the ‘beautiful American’ (distinguished individuals are referred to only by their titles), — your countrywoman, though she has spent the most of her life on the continent. Her father, Captain Elyot, — you thought him her lover? A mistake often made. There is a story” — the count shrugged his shoulders — “told in a thousand ways. It is enough to know that he had nearly lost her as a child. Now he attends her everywhere. Observe the expression of her face as she addresses him. Ah, my friend! one would do much to win such a regard as that. But she is already affianced, and to one of your own countrymen. He is approaching now, with a yellow mustache and a distinguished air.” There was a roll of r-r’s behind the Frenchman’s white teeth. “For myself I abhor a yellow mustache! You recognize him? Ah, yes, yes! General Orme was well known in your late war. They say that he was a friend of her father when they were both younger; and they sometimes add that he loved her mother. But who can tell?”

The young American’s eyes still followed the beautiful girl. She had dropped her hand from her father’s arm, and stood the centre of a group, her face animated, her eyes beaming to brilliancy, yet drooping shyly as they were turned from time to time upon her lover, — a man of noble presence, but evidently of twice her age.

“Beautiful?” repeated Count d’Alembert, echoing an exclamation at his side. “You may well say that. She has created a sensation this season,—her only one for the present. They sail in a few weeks for America,—immediately after the marriage. The father accompanies them. But that goes without saying: they are never separated. Yes, yes: she is most beautiful, and as charming in conversation as in face and manner, I can affirm, since I have the honor of her acquaintance. Present you? Ah, my friend! why lay up for yourself pains which must be unavailing? Let me whisper in your ear: *I have been near the candle!*”

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